ALSO BY PATRICK ATTAWAY

CORNBREAD POETRY

TITLELESS

MEDIOCRE ENDINGS

GLUTTON FOR DESPAIR

ABNORMAL POETRY

SPOILED RICE

ILLUSION/DELUSION

ICONIC MISERY

PARKED IN THE FLOWERBED

DEMISE OF THE TRINITY

PRICE OF THE TRINITY

SURVIVING NEW AMERICA

BIRCH

GREEN SKIN

ANGRY BLUE BIRD

STARING AT NIRVANA

PATRICK ATTAWAY

Introduction

Having previously considered releasing my novellas as one collection, I instead shoved them into other books. As such, with the exception of Charles Price, people kind of ignored them. Claire's Novel showed up in later editions of Disease of Ambition, and A Painter sold one copy as a solo publication before I included it in the original paperback of illusion/delusion. I even went so far as to record the entire novella as an audiobook for my podcast. Speaking of which, you'll also find the NERO series I wrote for that podcast in this collection.

Claire's Novel was originally a screenplay I wrote in 2013 for a screenwriting course. The idea came to me in a dream about my girlfriend getting a book published and forcing me to live in New York City. Louis CK and Larry David heavily inspired the writing and humor. At some point in 2017, I started rewriting the screenplay into a novella. A Painter is also based on a screenplay I wrote in college and had a much sadder ending, but some maturing led me to changing just about everything.

Charles Price originates from my last undergraduate semester in 2015 when I intended to write a novel based around stories I came up with while listening to Genesis' Invisible Touch. Having already written a rip off of American Psycho with Price of the Trinity, I went through three rewrites resulting in a much shorter story than I originally intended. Sometimes you want to run a 5K and can't even finish the first mile. Similarly, the novella ended up in the Kindle edition of Price of the Trinity only to end up in Toxic Literature.

I promise these stories aren't as boring as my introductions, and I'm sure someone will differ with me when they give me a one-star review on Good Reads as they subconsciously reveal their Napoleon complex.

Claire's Novel

I walk back into the kitchen and there're the same four women: Rosa, Selena, Kelly, and Layla. When I first started a few months ago, I thought they all knew what they were doing. I do the same thing every day and I'm still not sure. Despite that I'm the most educated, I manage to make myself look stupid more often than them. I'd wager Layla is a drop-out. I have a degree in English, which is as useful back in this ninety degree kitchen as a patient with crippling polio. I envy the hospital residents because they don't have to scrub refrigerators, removing industrial sized tubs of ranch dressing onto a cart just to get the metal grate at the bottom. When they eat that frozen sweet potato casserole, they don't realize I'm the one scooping it into each insulated bowl with a thirty minute time limit as Rosa breathes over me to make sure they all have the crusty brown sugar on top.

Most of the patients are asleep when I come in at five. I wear scrubs, a hairnet, and shave every few days so I don't have to wear a humiliating beard guard. As these four women move about the kitchen with ovens driving up the temperature, resident cards sprawled on the milk cooler, and metal fans forcing them to yell to hear one another, I start my cleaning list. Each week day has a unique routine of various tasks. Today is Monday, so I put the mop together, fill the bucket with a hose, take out the mat in the walk-in cooler to hose down, sweep out onion peels and debris from the wet cooler floor, fill a plastic bucket with bleach and scalding water to scrub the rubber strip around the cooler door, sweep ice out of the freezer, pull all the milk from the Groaan Milk coolers, pour bleach and 409 inside the milky chamber, and place all the new milk crates inside while prioritizing the ones with the closest expiration date. Of course, it's not always in that order, and not within the first hour because we also have stock deliveries on Mondays. I put that up while also completing the cleaning list.

But I'm usually still putting up stock by the time three of the women go into the serving room to prepare trays. Within half an hour, nurses start pulling in metal carts full of dirty dishes. The dish room consists of a stainless steel table that connects to a dishwashing machine that I often want to crawl inside and either scald or drown. You could fit two people in it. All of the plates, bowls, and silverware go inside a black tub that I fill with several buckets of hot water and two different kinds of blue industrial strength soap. Initially, it burns my hands as I reach in to grab pink plates and wash off the breakfast residue. The bowls full of grits and gravy take longer and leave a bigger mess. To avoid clogging the drain pipe at the end of the table, there are two strainers, which I periodically wash out when I dump the black tub, which I have to refill with water and soap. All the dishes go onto gray blaster crates that fit inside the dishwashing machine, and they dry on a long line. In between serving shifts, one of the women is supposed to come in to help pick up the clean dishes so they don't pile up, but that doesn't always happen.

I'm doing the job of two or three people every morning and get paid eight dollars an hour. I spent four years in college, made A's and B's, maintained a scholarship, and published poetry and essays in national journals. On paper, I'm overqualified for manual labor. In reality, I'm ill-equipped. When I first started, I was keeping up with women who had done this for years. They hated wasting their time training the new kid. My grandmother got me the job because she used to be an RN in the hospital, and they all thought this was a summer job before I started grad school.

Writers go to college, major in English, never write a novel, and end up with a useless degree. I did write a novel, but an unpublished novel is just that. My wife, Claire, also writes, but she was a mass communications major before dropping out to work as a secretary for Southwire. She's got an agent, Avery Jacobs, but I'm certain she's not good enough to write for a living. True writers don't care if they make a best seller's list. We write to kindle our passion rather than for money. Still, we all want to do what we love for a paycheck, and I'm not fond of washing dishes every day.

After my lunch break, I go back to the dish room while second shift takes over. By 1:20, I'm pulling my hairnet off and avoiding eye contact with Rosa. A year ago, I imagined myself in an intimate classroom with six other grad students and not having to worry about bleach running down my arm as I scrub an ice machine. I didn't know that I'd be in the pit of a hospital sweating next to an oven instead of writing papers and reading a new novel every few days. My time for reading and writing dwindles as each day forces me to forget the mornings that I slept into afternoons and studying French with the TV going as I copy the same phrases over and over for an exam.

Those women don't care that I can speak French and German. They're not amused by college boy, because they assume that I think I'm better than them. But they don't realize my shame. Four years in school only to hit reality's shit fan. I'm all over the walls they have to clean until they retire at seventy.

And I don't look forward to returning home. There's Claire's mess in the living room. Makeup sprawled on a stained towel, Pibb cans stacked up on the side table, her clothes piled in my recliner, and those damned Nicholas Sparks books on the shelf next to Bukowski, Ellis, McCarthy, and Vonnegut. There's a lot of literary atrocities going on in this house, and one of them is sitting in front of Avery Jacobs, who sits at my kitchen table.

His blonde hair swept back in a wave over glasses my great-grandfather would wear, Avery smiles at me with his red cheeks saying, *She's more marketable than you*. Claire hugs me and they both speak, but my eyes stay on the manuscript with her name written on top. The thought of her novel, which took all of three months to complete, having a publisher and mine sitting on my laptop ready to fall into the Recycle folder, deafens me from their news.

My gaze falls on a candle's flame on a white tabletop, and a waiter's hand flickers the wax filled, vanilla scent as a steak appears in front of us. I'm eating mine, but Avery and Claire keep talking. I haven't eaten a filet since my mother took us out for graduation. Ever since, it's been cheese burgers, pizza, and ramen. College food even when I'm out of school.

"It'll only take nine months before they start printing," Avery says. "Mr. Hughes is pleased with your manuscript, Claire. He's keen on you too."

"Tell Mr. Hughes *thank you*," She says. "I'm humbled."

"How are you taking this, Tim?" Avery asks me. "Aren't you excited for Claire?"

I look at Avery's three-hundred dollar haircut, pressed suit, and my reflection in his glasses. You never see how off the path you are until you see someone else who never needed for anything. I'm wearing an untucked black iZod and khakis from before I lost thirty pounds two years ago. Stubble itches my face as I see Claire's eyes telling me what she wants to hear, but I want to be a passive aggressive asshole instead.

"Of course," I say. "She's getting everything she's ever wanted."

But Claire looks back to Avery and they continue rubbing each other's genitals through their conversation. If Avery wasn't gay, I'd swear he was fucking her. I'm not jealous, or I would've left her the first time she slept with another guy. That was our friend, Steve. Then there was the hipster she met at the campus Starbucks, though I don't remember his name. She's drawn to knowing what her life could be like without me and reality creeping over her. Claire doesn't want to be a secretary/college drop out. So, she wrote a book, and if she wasn't so ambivalent to me, I'd swear it was out of spite.

"Did you ever hear back from that indie house in Austin?" Avery asks.

"They were a little nicer in their refusal than Mr. Hughes," I say.

"Well, keep trying," Avery shrugs. "Someone's gonna pick you up, eventually."

Now my half-eaten steak looks less appetizing. Claire's just beginning to eat, and Avery hasn't shut up yet to realize his food's here. Funny, because he's not a skinny fellow.

"He'll have plenty of time to work now that you're published," Avery winks at Claire.

"Oh, Avery," Claire says between chews. "Where did Mr. Hughes put us up in New York?"

"Schick Decke," Avery nods. "Hughes has put many successful writers who are starting out there."

"The ceiling or the blanket?" I ask.

Schick Decke either means *fancy ceiling* or *fancy blanket* in German. I only needed one German credit along with my four French courses to complete my degree. Seems like a Yankee move to name a bohemian apartment building an obscure German phrase.

"Umm," Avery says.

He finally begins eating his salmon and potatoes while Claire eats a grilled chicken salad.

"Your choice in cuisine is not unlike your writing style, Tim," Avery quips.

I don't think about writing while I'm at work, but today is my last day. Rosa smiles at me each time we pass, but no one nags me or asks if I'm doing what I should. When I woke up this morning at four for the last time, I wondered if I should bother going in. But these women, though tight-knit and non-inclusive toward me, deserve more than this college graduate messing up their day. There'll be a replacement by tomorrow, and they'll never see me again.

But what Avery said falls in line with what every other editor and agent said before. Those creative writing professors with their boring short story reading assignments and excerpts from Stephen King's *On Writing* said the same too. My writing isn't realistic. I spent too much time working through character development. Despite that my works possess plot and a story, they work as if in their own reality. My characters aren't relatable, but I never relate to reality. Fiction is about escapism.

And when I sit at my laptop with my wrinkled copies of *American Psycho* and *Ham on Rye* sitting on my desk for guidance, I have to live with Avery's reality. People want to buy Claire's novel because they like romance, optimistic endings, and formulaic tropes we all know yet don't realize every damn movie and book are the same story with new faces. The days of *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catcher in the Rye* are over, and I'll never see my name on the front of a book unless I write something housewives and teenage girls will buy. Intelligent readers only account for a small part of the market.

This realization usually goes away with me shrugging it off and remembering that persistence may change my luck. But with my hand in a lukewarm bucket and an SOS pad stabbing through my rubber glove, I have to let a few tears out. Before Claire got a book deal, I was hopeful that I'd be the famous writer. I'm resigned to scrubbing table tops and mopping floors until I retire if I want to continue working. Living off Claire gives me visions of stomach ulcers.

When we start packing our books, clothes, pictures, and plates in boxes, the apartment grows less familiar as the walls go bare, missing furniture reveals dust bunnies, and our life in Georgia enters the past as an obsolete haven to comfort our college struggles and daily quarrels. We get along better the less we speak. That's why I liked that we had jobs, and when we got home, I'd write in the living room and she'd do whatever in the bedroom. Probably chatting with strange men online.

My mother waits for me at the car as I put the last box into a U-Haul for whoever Hughes hired to move us. There's gray hair at her temples that I didn't notice before. Her eyes, red with age and tears, look at the man who was once her sweet pea. And I was a shitty kid. After my parents divorced, my lack of a father figure made me rebel in school, and no matter the spankings or bad notes home, I didn't stop disobeying her until I grew out of childhood and morphed into a greasy faced, shaggy haired pre-teen who locked himself away to play video games and download porn from Yahoo videos on a dial up connection. Even when I got older, I ignored my mother just like I do Claire.

"Write me a good one while you're away," Mother says.

"Miss you too," I say.

The awaiting Uber driver motions for me to hurry up, so I hug Mother and get in. There's no point in looking back. Claire's forcing me to leave, and I go where my wife says. Despite that she's given me reasons to stay behind, file for divorce, and return to my miserable single life, I remain her husband. I'd rather sleep next to someone who loves me when it convenient than await some dream woman who'll show me any appreciation.

New York City doesn't hit me until I wake up in the Hilton thanks to Claire talking to Avery on the phone. I haven't looked out the window yet, but now it's morning and I've never been north of Tennessee. There's a building across from us that casts a shadow on the street below. We're in a row of them. The sky isn't blue. It's a haze that I strain to see over the city.

I don't even get to shower before Avery is at the door welcoming us to New York and hurrying us out so we can move into our new apartment. Visiting other places is a novel experience. You can go back home after a few days and return to your familiar surroundings. I can't leave. When I look inside the living room that morphs into a kitchen with only one bedroom and a bathroom, I miss the two story, three bedroom domicile we shared.

We don't unpack because our belongings are already out. My books are on a shelf. Laptops on the coffee table. But there is one box sitting on the couch that I marked *DONOTOPEN*. Claire points to it, her curiosity forming a smile.

"What's the box for?" She asks.

"That's my emergency kit," I sit down on the chair opposite her.

"We just moved here. Why do you need an emergency kit?"

"It has a miniature cannon inside."

"Why do I feel like you're leading up to a bad joke?"

"In case I want to shoot myself back to Georgia," I smile.

Sitting on my lap, my semi-attractive wife scratches my scruff and kisses my forehead. She was once a sorority girl with a figure so thin I thought she was snap underneath me. Now, her natural dirty blonde hair doesn't look like she ever bleached it to fit in with the other girls, and those gaunt cheeks filled out with my cooking and cases of Pibb. Instead of a cheerleader, she resembles a housewife, so I suppose her audience will relate.

"You'll like it here," She says. "You'll have free time to write while I'm gone. There're plenty of other jobs too."

"I moved all the way to New York just to wash dishes again, I guess."

"Or you can write a different novel and we can spend our days together."

Dead Man's Handle is about a mortician who is obsessed with Tom Waits, trains, and his orange Mustang. It's yet to find a publisher. Claire's novel, *Antlers*, supposedly possesses a plot about a man who meets a woman who doesn't like him, he wins her over with grand gestures, her parents hate him, his parents love her, and they end up married. Something like that. I never read it.

So, I have to write something more marketable. Fine. I'll publish the books I care about afterward. But that requires me to think of a formulaic idea that is unique enough to gain both an agent and a publisher's attention. Of course, they can put it out, but they can't force anyone to buy it. I never think further than publication because I guess I'd rather have the validation rather than money.

Avery comes in and Claire runs to him while I ponder my laptop. Will I write today, or will I waste my time in this cell called my new apartment?

"Isn't it quaint?" Avery asks with his arms stretched beyond me giving a shit.

"Imagine what I can write in here!" Claire says.

"Well, before you can write your next bestseller," Avery rolls his eyes back while crossing his fingers, "We have a meeting with Mr. Hughes in an hour. Would you care to join us for brunch, Tim?"

"Can't," I say. "Gotta see if we packed the Andy Griffith Show on VHS. I'm just *dying* to see familiar faces."

I lean back as if I'm channeling my inner Liberace and strut across the room to the bookshelf.

"Alas," I declare, "I've misplaced my Opie!"

Avery manages a laugh before pulling Claire out into the hallway. And when I look around this place that possesses only a few of my belongings from Georgia, I see this isn't my home. This is Claire's Barbie Doll House. I'm not even her Ken doll. My books, laptop, and clothes serve as necessary nuances to her new life.

Last week, I sent my manuscript to several new agents, so I have some hope before I shelve *Dead Man's Handle* and write my *Post Office*. Opening Gmail, I see three new emails in my professional account. The first is from an agent in Montana who responds, *Can I please have the five minutes that I spent reading this back?* So, I move to the next. *You're not a writer. You're a chronic masturbator*

with a keyboard. At least he didn't accuse me of owning a MacBook. But the third is the guy who represented Percival Conroy's first novel, *The Grate Erasure*. Before I open it, I imagine his response somehow differing from the others. He knows good writing. In bold words, he responded, *This is a piece of shit. Go fuck yourself.*

"Oh man," I pull back from the screen. "That's just unprofessional."

I manage three sentences in a Word document before hitting backspace. This happens several times before I realize this isn't in me right now. I want to write what I love. The escapism from the world through characters I develop like a method actor. There are characters from stories and my novel that I spent weeks, months, or years trying to understand and write from their point of view without repeating something I wrote before. While all writers have a distinct style, I want to display some variety in character studies.

Dead Man's Handle was the novel I wanted to publish first. I started it in college before I took any creative writing courses, met Claire, or even discovered some of my favorite authors. Through years of development, I finished what I considered a good book. It didn't matter if anyone else liked it until I tried finding a publisher.

And it's possible I'm not meant to write for a living. Maybe someone will discover my work after I inevitably jump off Schick Decke. Before I plot my suicide, I'd like to find a new story. It has to feel genuine enough for me to attempt, or I'll grow bored and shelve it. We all write a hundred novels that never get past the first ten pages.

I can take the day off. Grab a carton of ice cream, watch a movie, and peruse Stephen King's advice in *On Writing*. Maybe taking my first steps into New York alone will jolt my creativity. After I put on my leather jacket, my feet stop at the front door, and I look through the keyhole at the door across the hall. There's someone living a different life than me over there. They probably know what they want. Their job, dreams, lifestyle, and hobbies came from years of living in this city. They can't fathom growing up in a rural town thousands of miles down South where you either become a lawyer or doctor if you want everyone's approval. Writing is for the Yankees who can afford the small apartments, MacBook, electric razors to keep that black five o'clock shadow, and white v-necks that expose their ribs and chest hair. I had to pick an English major and a job in a hospital kitchen.

There's a store across the street, and I expected traffic with horns and yelling cab drivers all the time. I see one car parked on the entire block while a few people walk around the sidewalk. Jaywalking, I don't encounter a mob of stereotypical New Yorkers but rather silence and indifference. Leaves rustling on the pavement make more noise than the neighborhood around me.

I find a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia in a cooler next to porn mags with sealed wrappers concealing breasts and genitalia. My mouth tightens when I hand the cashier my money because I don't want her to hear my accent and launch on a tirade against Southerners. I thank her under my breath so she doesn't suspect me.

Back up in the apartment, I sit on the couch, placing the ice cream on the coffee table while searching for the remote. There must be something to turn the TV on. But when I fail, I look up and see this isn't our old set. The screen is twice as large and there's a small box at the bottom which doesn't resemble our satellite system.

I walk over and discover a remote for the box, but not the TV, so I feel around the side to find a power button. Doesn't make sense that there isn't a way to turn on the thing. My mother had a Sony TV that came on when I turned on her Blu-ray player, so pressing the button on the box might work.

When the screen turns on, I see selections for Hulu, Netflix, YouTube, and Amazon Prime, but no cable. I'm not fond of streaming services because I like the experience of switching from station to station and discovering things. Maybe reruns of *Fresh Prince* or a Clint Eastwood movie. With Netflix, you have to choose something. People marathon shows and movies instead of growing tired of cable and doing other things. Like writing.

Instead, I start in on the ice cream. The first spoonful fills in a thin layer, and I suck it in as if savoring pinot noir from a dusty bottle. Usually, I eat the top and leave enough to last another couple of days. But Cherry Garcia feels better than a rough hump after a summer shift in the kitchen. Sugar is heroin to me when I'm depressed, and without Claire to sit in the other room, I'm an unemployed, unpublished writer alone and away from home.

As the pint fills my stomach, I finally have a feeling to help me forget the melancholy. Running to the kitchen sink, I puke out chocolate chips and black cherries in a mist of acid and milk. Vomiting makes me panic as visions of John Bonham and Hendrix choking appear. But it's a clean purge and I don't gag.

"Oh man," I moan. "I suck."

I'm spinning in an office chair next to what I suppose is Claire's desk when she opens the front door and slams it back with her heel.

"I got a MacBook Pro today!"

As Claire plops the box on the desk and opens the white cardboard, I glance at the HP laptop I bought her last year for eight hundred dollars that has superior specs to any Mac. But that's not Macintosh is about. They're selling style and convenience. She's just going to install Microsoft Word and Chrome anyway. It's not like Hughes bought her Final Cut Pro to edit *Antlers*.

"I got more rejections," I say.

She's pulling out the computer and wondering where the power cable goes. I love talking to myself.

"Maybe you could help," I swirl in the chair. "Since you're the successful one."

"Oh yeah, hon."

"I don't have any friends here," I say. "Maybe I should find a job..."

The MacBook starts up and I'm successfully invisible.

"As a pimp," I say. "I'll have sleazy women around me at all times."

"That sounds good."

"Maybe a few guys too."

"I'll be like Rizzo."

"Gosh," Claire sighs. "I love New York."

If Claire understood what makes a good story, then she may possess more depth as a person. When we met in college, she was not my type, and those blowfish frat boys who crush scales under their feet provided a mask around me so I didn't have to wear one. I didn't like parties or drinking. I

tried pot once with a girl I went to high school with and thought my heart was going to stop. And when I saw Claire in her pink shirt with a purple tri-delta insignia, my eyes didn't lock on her while everyone else stood still. She was any other pretty girl without an identity, and that party wasn't for me.

I had Yueling in a yellow cup that loosened my back muscles and made my glances around the room more frequent. The only thing I stopped to focus on was the beer. Someone hearing this story may expect me to break up a fight or punch a guy getting handsy with Claire, but she and I drifted in the same direction and she spoke to me first. No, I don't remember what she said.

I hadn't slept with someone in over a year. My bed was frozen on one side. I dated around until I hit my junior year. The house was my cell, and I didn't want any more relationships that lasted a week or a month. And when I got used to being alone, I started looking at women with less desperation. For a while, the wallflowers who seemed smart but didn't know themselves yet looked appetizing. But the college crowd grew younger because I was at the University of West Georgia. Students either flunk out or transfer away because Carrollton, my hometown, didn't have a mall, theme park, or places to hang out unless you lived in the Greek village or liked Walmart. The professors landed there because their life was like a drunken darts player missing the board.

So, when this girl talked to me, I didn't have reservations about responding. She was pretty with her bleached hair and mismatched eyes. One was blue, the other green. No one notices that unless they focus on Claire. That's what made me different to her, I guess. I paid attention to something other than her pushup bra or tanned legs.

Right now, the only thing I can change about this situation is my outlook. New York hosts many cultures and places I never thought existed. Why not explore? With another day to myself, Claire gone with Avery again, I look for a tree and can't find one. It's autumn, my favorite season, and the leaves thought about changing in Georgia but wanted to wait for me to leave first. Here, there must be some on the ground by now.

There's a note on the door: *Rental car parked out front. Keys on counter - Claire.* In my single days, I took drives at night to Mt. Zion and Bowdon, these two towns that hadn't aged since their inception. Mt. Zion got a Dollar General and a new high school recently, but they don't even have a gas station. Whenever I had a block and couldn't get another word on the page, I jumped in my truck and zoned out to whatever NPR was playing. Getting in a car and exploring might help.

I discover a Toyota Prius in a parallel spot, though I haven't driven a car since I was sixteen. Claire deemed my truck unnecessary for the city. Driving a Ford F-150 with an extended cab and four wheel drive compared to a Prius is akin to riding a bike versus driving a tank. It takes years to understand a heavy truck that gets eleven miles to the gallon. Getting up enough speed to merge on the interstate takes a lead foot, and drivers always got mad when I tapped the brakes. They don't understand that a Ford truck can total Toyotas, Nissans, and other foreign budget cars without breaking forty miles per hour. I know because I side-slammed a CNA with her three-year-old son when I was sixteen. She was driving a green Toyota and never saw it again after I hit her doing thirty-five.

When I first hit the gas, I'm slung forward. Hitting the brake sounds like the time Walter White let Walt Jr. drive their SUV in an empty parking lot. But once I'm in the road and people stop glaring at me, I give my butt cheeks a rest.

With my iPhone plugged into the Aux, I select Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew*. While I never got heavy into jazz, this is one of those essential albums you always hear about. I especially like John McLaughlin's guitar playing in contrast to the bass and trumpet. Steely Dan might fit this town more, but I want something to make ideas explode in me rather than crackle like Pop Rocks.

Characters need an arch outside of the story. We need to see them change. I think about a person's basic identity and state. Where do I want them to begin and end? Something in their life makes them a certain way. We all know *The Lion King*. Simba is a spoiled child in his father's kingdom. Yes, I know it's actually Hamlet mashed up with Kimba, but I'm focusing on Simba's evolution here. When his father, Mufasa, dies, so does Simba's pride. Two outsiders discover him and he discovers the world outside his own. What he actually experiences is reality. Animals have to scavenge for their food and survival, but Simba was in a large lion tribe, ergo, the top of the food chain. Once he understands his life before was farcical, he becomes an adult. He realizes his father's death was not his fault because power makes us a target for those who crave more power. Scar didn't have to murder Mufasa, but he couldn't settle for a luxurious life under his brother's rule. Simba realizes that Scar was not his protector but rather his enemy, and Simba fully realizes his lion savagery when he avenges Mufasa's death. Consider how Simba evolved from a singing, cute cub into blood stained nightmare fuel.

All characters need their dark night of the soul. A conflict that pushes them to grow and change their life. One character cannot make a novel, though. Writers have to come up with other interesting people to interact with their protagonists. Antagonists often overshadow the protagonist because writing evil compels an audience more than good because we all have morbid curiosity. We want to see the villain succeed, but we don't want our hero to fail. I like to write anti-heroes to circumvent this.

But supporting characters give us depth and side-stories. Timon and Pumbaa, RD-D2 and C-3PO, and Tuco from *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* act as walls to encase our protagonist. They are a part of the journey and we hate to see them die. *Lonesome Dove* seems to go from death to death until our favorite protagonist is dead and we're left with Tommy Lee Jones in his underwear and Robert Duvall's mummy.

That's what Claire doesn't get. When I looked over her shoulder to tell her about what makes good writing, she would bring up her favorite films and Nicholas Sparks. Those forgettable, formulaic stories that begin and end how we expect them to. She never read *Dead Man's Handle*. I couldn't even get her into *Less Than Zero*.

But all my knowledge and opinions on writing lose meaning when I'm daydreaming while at a four-way stop and Miles can't blow his horn anymore. I notice the silence after the crash on my right. And I'm stopped in front of an apartment building only three blocks from my own, and there's an Indian man looking at me through his windshield, which is only a few inches from my passenger side window.

He tries to back up, but I reverse and block him from escaping.

"Get out of the way!" He screams. "I have more fares to pick up!"

When I look at his yellow cab, it's not even dented. The Prius's windows are cracked on the right side, and the doors probably look like crumpled tinfoil.

"I'm calling the cops!" I hold up my phone.

As I try dialing 911, I hear the cabdriver cursing as he backs up and turns around to go in the other direction. No one tried to stop him, and I'm in the middle of an intersection with half of a Toyota.

A car horn blows, and I look back to see a white haired woman in a Cadillac flipping me off. At least the old people in Georgia possess some class.

Driving back to my apartment building, I remember my freedom in college meant little to me without someone there. I got the societal norm of being a husband to someone stuck in my head at an early age, so I treated every girl I dated as if she were my potential wife. I wasn't there to screw around, and I thought women appreciated that. But once I figured out there're one-night stands for a reason, I knew I'd have to wait to find someone serious.

After Claire and I got married, I thought our relationship would stay the same. I overlooked that she didn't like to read, and when she started, I didn't comment about her lack of literary fiction in the diet of romance and mystery novels. When she turned on the radio, I pinched my thumb so I wouldn't complain about the drivel on top forty stations. I figured her taste didn't affect her personality.

We haven't read each others' novels. Though she asked me for guidance, I didn't think she'd sign a book deal with Hughes Publishing and move us to New York. But I never examined our relationship this much until I left Georgia. I have the college freedom again to waste time analyzing my life after I thought adulthood was fifty years of working a job I hated and answering to people above me.

There was a woman on second shift, Dorinda, who talked to me while I finished up in the dish room before leaving. I remember the reality of this real world struck me during a conversation about *SpongeBob Square pants*. My impression of Patrick Star answering the phone at the Krusty Krab led Dorinda to refer to him as *stupid*.

"...but I like Squidward!" She said. "He hates everybody."

"I feel bad for him, though," I said. "He's the most intelligent character on the show, yet he has to work at a burger joint."

"I know!" She said. "Patrick doesn't even have a job."

"He lives under a rock," I said. "How much rent do you think he has to pay?"

Squidward represents reality, though. I have a bachelors in English, and though I'm not a genius, I didn't study and maintain my scholarship for four years with washing dishes in mind. The advisors don't tell you that degrees in English, Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and pretty much any liberal art isn't worth shit unless you plan to teach and research in your field. I wanted to write. Now, I suppose I can every day with Clair providing the income, but what kind of man sits at home and doesn't contribute?

I must not be a good writer. Throwing my jacket across the room, I find Stephen King's *On Writing*, my second copy after one of my ex-girlfriends took my battered one from a used bookstore,

open the nearest window, and toss the lies I half-believed about prose, storytelling, and passive voice onto the street for the next car to distort and mangle, much like the van that hit King and caused him to stop writing for five whole minutes.

"I hate this city!" I shout.

"Then leave, you gray-wearing jerk-off!"

When I'm in a frenzy, the shortcut dirt road to a mental breakdown, I don't consider that anyone will hear me scream into a pillow or rip pages out of books. Not only did someone respond, but they generalized me almost accurately. If they'd thrown in a remark about Robert Smith bellowing on my stereo, I would think I was talking to my fictional self.

"Maybe I would if my wife wasn't so successful!" I hurt my throat.

"Your wife is a whore!"

"Hey, who said that?"

No one responds.

"Yeah!" I buck up. "Thought so!"

"We won the war, Southern boy!"

"Well," I say to myself, "I can't argue with that."

When Claire and Avery return from whatever meeting or shindig they made off to, I'm in my underwear with a bag of Ruffles, Dean's onion dip, and *The Walking Dead* on Netflix. I like to avoid popular shows because I assume they're subpar. If everyone raves about something, I assume I won't like it or that they're a bunch of idiots who lap up whatever the mainstream media feeds them. Of course, I'm wrong, and this is a good show that I put off watching because of my fear of having something in common with the general public. Zombies also scare me.

They stand in the doorway, almost if they expected me to be in this position. They're just surprised they were so right. But this is the right time for me to play the lazy, weight gaining husband while the out-of-my-league wife brings home more bacon for me to inhale. Besides, I ignored a lot during my school days, and I didn't have time to watch internet TV while working in a hospital kitchen. I can redeem myself in humanization through what Isaac Brock refers to as the window of my color TV.

"What happened to the car, Tim?" Avery asks.

"Oh," I say. "Hope you got the insurance."

After her best friend leaves, Claire shuts the bedroom door so the zombies and I retain our intimacy. I suppose it's like our apartment in Georgia. She'd go in our room, I'd stay in the living room. Sometimes we didn't share meals. During the summers between semesters, we kept weird, separate sleep cycles. I'd wake up at two in the morning, she'd already be up for hours, and I'd go to sleep again after she woke up.

If I divorce her and go back home, I'll have to move in with my mother without a job, and whatever course my life takes, Claire will be a famous writer and I'll be the guy in the shadows. Remaining here, within or outside the relationship, doesn't give me a purpose, but I'm not broke and living in my mom's basement.

Why hasn't she dumped me, though? Some sense of loyalty? Does she love me? Getting published and moving miles up the country was an opportunity to ditch me. Yet I'm here.

So, when I lay down next to her tonight, I see Claire's blue and green eyes in the reflection of her iPad, however indifferent they are to me, and remember how they struck me at that party I didn't belong at. When I touch her cheek, she sighs and smiles like a mother remembering her son's last words before the gravedigger lowers the casket. I kiss her and it's brief, but there were times we couldn't stop.

"Hughes is in talks with Sony," Claire says. "They're optioning *Antlers* as a movie."

Her gaze returns to the screen, but I'm no longer in the bed. The apartment is gone. Darkness hazes over my ambition. This is happening. The train holds many excited people, and though Claire sits near the engine in a plush room to herself, I'm a passenger in the last cart just as alone, yet our distance from one another tells me I'm the last to our destination even if we're traveling at the same speed.

"Exciting," I say.

"You're a film buff," Claire says. "Who do you think should direct?"

"Garry Marshall's dead."

"Oh, Tim, who did *Pretty Woman*?"

"Garry Marshall. He's dead."

"Wouldn't you be steamed if David Fincher took interest?"

"He'll turn *Antlers* into *Ram Horns*."

When I was still in college and *Fifty Shades* was a thing, I bought a copy because Bret Easton Ellis was friends with the author, who was on Vintage like him. I already knew the story was awful, partially based on some *Twilight* fanfiction she wrote, but there was a curiosity in me that I needed to settle. Six pages in, I put the paperback book big enough to kill a few kittens in a drawer. Young adult writers had better prose and dialog. When that book came out, no one could say publishers only buy the books they think are well written or good ideas. That series was complete shit.

Claire will no doubt write a sequel to *Antlers*. I'm sure it'll be akin to *The Empire Strikes Back*. When she's run out of steam and goes onto her next somewhat original novel idea, no one will want her anymore.

Sitting in the living room while clicking through old pictures of my life in Georgia, I stop on my parents' wedding photo. My mother was pregnant with me, but only she knew. I'm not sure why she kept it from everyone, but growing up I assumed that's why they got married after only a three month relationship. It's as though their divorce nearly four years later was the next step. History fits together without many twists, I believe. You know when the wars will begin and end, the presidents who only had one term, and dictators lost control. Relationships only make sense in hindsight. My mother grew up with three brothers and a sister, the middle child of two lawyers and two healthcare professionals.

I always regret treating my mother as if she's an annoyance, though I'm not able to change my patience with her. She initiates conversations at awkward times, interrupts me, digresses frequently, and tries to continue thoughts and ask questions about things we haven't spoken about since the last three subject changes. I can't tell her to drop sensitive, personal topics, either.

Yet she raised me alone without a man. I'm the product of a divorcee who hasn't dated anyone since the nineties. Her mother and siblings believed it was because of me, but I think she

made that choice because she didn't need anyone. Why try trusting another man when all the men in your life shit on you? She can take care of herself, though she's not always willing to admit that.

With me gone in New York, I'm sure she's adjusting to not seeing me again. Knowing me, I may not visit her for a year. That makes me a bad son, I'm sure. When she dies, hopefully many decades from now, I'll regret a lot. Mostly that I wasn't kinder to her.

"Hello?" She answers the phone.

"Mother!" I try to sound excited. "How are you?"

"...I'm fine," She says. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" I lie. "I just wanted to talk to you."

"Oh," She pauses. "How is New York?"

"Uhh."

I've left the apartment twice. There's enough city here to explore for years, and I haven't traveled three blocks without an incident. When I walked around the Square in Carrollton, I didn't have to worry about talking to people because even in the South, most of us want to keep to ourselves. A stranger isn't a potential friend anymore. We may smile and nod, but we all have places we want to be. But walking out into New York feels like I'm unarmed during the zombie apocalypse. Someone may not like the way I look and attack. What's worse is that if someone does try to rob or hurt me, I bet others will be indifferent.

"I miss Carrollton," I say.

"I thought you hated it here?" She says.

"Then I miss you."

"Do you want momma to come and visit?"

"Umm..."

"Have you met any of your neighbors?"

"What?"

"Why don't you introduce yourself around?"

After brushing my teeth, combing my hair, putting on a clean shirt and jeans, I stand in front of my door and look back at the number across the hall. They're just people. Not everyone is a hermit with enough cynicism to choke an elephant. So, I walk over, glance to my left and right, and knock. They don't have to answer, and I prefer they don't. But if they do, I doubt they'll pull a 12 gauge on me and tell me to get on my knees.

A shadow appears at the peephole, and I keep my awkward stance as if I didn't notice. A chain rattles, the deadbolt unlocks, and the knob turns. I should run back into my apartment, but they'll think I was playing a prank or that I'm a freak and they already know I live here. Making an enemy this early wouldn't help my anxiety about this place.

Unshaven with his brown curly hair resembling a beatnik in an indie rock band, the shirtless wonder that is my neighbor peers at me over the gray bags under his dark eyes. I expected a response other than a glare, yet we look at one another as if in a Mexican standoff waiting for whoever is dumb enough to speak first.

"Hi, I'm your neighbor, Tim," I wave and lean back, maintaining my casual facade, "And I just thought I'd introduce myself..."

He doesn't slam the door. It closes, the deadbolt and chain returning to their previous positions, and he's probably going to go back to sleep or his Tumblr blog where he'll rant about his new dumbass neighbor.

"Hey," Someone says down the hall.

The next door over, I see a balding man with a ginger complexion holding a grocery bag. If this were a movie, he'd be struggling to unlock his door while a baguette stuck out of the brown sack. Instead, my nicer neighbor laughs under his breath at me studying him and winks.

"Don't mind Jeffery," He says. "He's like that to everyone."

"Oh," I don't know how to respond.

"Do you want to help me with my groceries?"

It's one bag, and he doesn't really need help, but he introduces himself as David. His apartment looks more lived in than mine because he has a carpet under a solid wood coffee table, a red sofa that's held many butts, a CRT flat screen from the nineties, and a turntable system with long speakers and a bookshelf crammed with vinyl. This isn't Jerry Seinfeld's place where David's friends come over for their whimsical adventures. He's lived here for a while.

Tossing me a bottle of water, David invites me to sit down and takes his brown jacket with wool liner off. I never needed something that heavy in Georgia, but it makes sense here.

"Jeffery has a bachelors in journalism, another in English, and a masters in mass communications," David opens a box of donuts on the coffee table. "He used to write for the Times, but you'll never guess why he's in this apartment building without a job."

"Drinking? Drugs?" I ask.

"He slept with the editor and chief's husband."

As David chews his éclair, I watch his smug smile and laugh. But he nods and raises his eyebrows to tell me it isn't a joke. The guy who's life I briefly interrupted was gay. I have a gay person living across the hall from me. We have gay people in Carrollton, but they're rare birds who presumably fly in while on their way somewhere else. Or they teach at West Georgia and live in an apartment near campus amongst their fellow flakes. But it's not like all gay men walk funny or speak with a lisp. They're human like me. They're just uncommon enough to take me aback when I find out they're not *straight*. I still hate that term. *Straight* implies people who aren't heterosexual are different or not normal. Whatever someone does in their bedroom or in the backseat of their Honda Civic after a Backstreet Boys concert is their own business.

"I couldn't tell," I shrug.

"Well, you can't assume anything about people in New York," David says, "Except that they're probably an asshole."

"Why are you here, then?" I ask.

"I'm not originally from New York," He says, "Or did you mean why am I in this apartment?"

"Both," I say.

"I'm a comedian," David finishes his donut and reaches for another. "Well, I'm a comedy writer. I moved here because this is where you go for that."

"How's it working out?"

"I got offered a job at SNL," He says.

"Why didn't you take it?"

"Because SNL sucks! Have you ever watched a full episode? There's a reason they don't replay those old ones with Chevy Chase and Bill Murray."

David saying that he wouldn't take a job with Saturday Night Live is akin to me turning down a publishing deal with Penguin because they also print novelty comics with stick figures. SNL is a breeding ground of talent no matter the quality of their content. Everyone's laughed at their sketches because out of all the bad ones, there're legendary jokes, characters, and actors working together to make something brilliant. But I'm not a comedian, so I don't follow their code. I don't know anyone from college, professors or students, who would dismay that I *sold out* unless the quality of my writing and storytelling felt compromised.

"Who do you write for now?" I ask.

"It's a funny thing about entertainment," David says. "There was a writer's strike, as you may recall. I kept writing. The unions found out, of course, and I'm unofficially blacklisted. If someone sees my name in the credits for *Snowdogs 2*, then there could be another strike. No one will hire me."

"You're not writing anymore?" I ask.

"I'm a ghostwriter," He says. "When someone like Steve Colbert needs better jokes, they call me. I live from check to check, and there're times when no one calls."

When I hear about people struggling, I get uncomfortable. I can't really relate. My mother took care of me, and even if I needed money now, she'd help. I got grief from a girl I tried to date once because she said I didn't have a right to feel depressed because my family had money. As if poverty is the only root cause of sadness. But when I sit on this creaky chair that probably came from a dining room set or a thrift shop and look at David's apartment where he's spent years getting by, I don't know how to respond.

"What do you do?" He asks.

"My wife and I moved here from Georgia," I say. "We're both writers, but she's getting published."

"So she's going to be a New York Times best seller and you're going to sponge off her? Not a bad gig, man. Probably beats whatever you did before."

"I don't want to just leech off my wife," I say.

"Wanna trade places?" David opens his arms and looks around. "Maybe your wife can get you published."

"Yeah, that'd be a good move," I say.

"Why not?" He asks. "Are you jealous of her success?"

I think so, but I wouldn't admit it. Claire isn't the same writer I am. She's not versed in literature but rather pop culture. I'm writing because I love the art form, and if I published a novel, I'd want my academic peers to appreciate the content. Students could analyze my work and discuss it in their classes or write about me in their senior thesis. In ten years, no one will remember *Antlers*. It won't be an intelligent person's favorite book. Claire may make a lot of money, but that's not what writing is about.

"Not at all," I say. "But I'm a fish out of water here. I've got nowhere to go. Nothing to do."

"So, let's go somewhere," David says. "There's no reason to stay here all day."

"Really?" I stand up before realizing I'm making this awkward. "You'd be willing to do that?"

"Keep it in your pants, dude," David laughs. "We're just getting coffee."

Back outside again, I'm worried what might climb out of the sewers or crawl from an alley. David stands near me like a shield, though I'm sure he's not aware that I'm not comfortable here.

"So, why is your wife successful but you're not?" David asks.

The smile on his face tells me that he's aware I ask myself the same question. I must be a bad writer. Though I don't want to believe that, it's possible. My ideas may not be for this time period. Genius like that isn't a title one can bestow on themselves, and I'm certainly not anything special. My work is, though.

"I wrote a novel, so Claire wanted to write a novel," I say. "I got an agent, so Claire got an agent. I took four years to write my book, and she took four months. I'm still getting rejection letters, and she got accepted by the first publisher her agent sent it to."

"You're kidding," David says. "What's her book about?"

"I couldn't even tell you," I say. "It's called *Antlers*, though."

"Why did she give it such a stupid name?"

"Something about two people splitting apart but remaining together."

We stand behind people in a place that isn't Starbucks, which isn't alien to me. Gallery Row in Carrollton was a frequent hangout for people who like good coffee and hipsters who spent too much time on the Square. But this is not an imitation some Southerners looking to bring culture to a small town would steal inspiration from. I'm in one of those places they show in movies set in New York with real New York culture clash, yet as this realization rests in the back of my mind, this feels as much of a facade as Carrollton.

Of course, they're normal people who don't dress to garner attention. That's what hipsters do. They want to be so different that people recognize their originality that they spent so much time crafting that they forgot to work on a personality. It's one thing to grow a beard, because that doesn't require effort. A man stops shaving and hair grows on his face, and he often doesn't notice. Letting it grow long and styling it does. Combine the facial hair with a top knot. Again, hair grows, you forget to get it cut, but you'll eventually notice if other people don't point it out. Pretty soon, you have the classic hipster bush and knot combination. Buy a flannel shirt from a thrift shop or American Eagle, maybe gauge your ears, scuff up your Converse shoes, and then you're officially a part of the counterculture. But that's not original.

The truth is that no one is special, and those who stick out in a crowd without their clothing or behavior catching your eye are probably a celebrity. I point this out because I loathe the term *alternative*. It's just as mainstream as Top 40 radio and Coca Cola. If enough people wear a certain style or torrent the same Twenty-One Pilots albums, then they're no longer individuals. They are a mass group, and they're just as despicable as soccer moms and white collar businessmen.

People aren't noticing the Southerner who's judging all of them in this bohemian coffee shop. They're too enthralled in their cell phones and tablets. Coffee is not even secondary. Some of them come to be noticed. Some of them want the Wi-Fi password. I'm here with David because I don't know where else to be.

"It doesn't sound like you love her," David says.

"I'm increasingly aware of that," I say. "Maybe I'm in denial."

"Denial that you're no longer in love?"

"Denial that I actually do love her."

David stirs his cappuccino while I let my chai latte cool. With Claire gone, I might be able to examine who were are as a couple better, and despite all the negative situations I dreg up, I know why I'm still with her. If I left, I'd miss her. And the pain of loss hurts more than the tension from a failing relationship. Looking down the cliff, pondering jumping, and realizing that falling doesn't stop until you hit the bottom and there's no more you isn't the same as actually jumping. I can turn around and head back into the forest to find another way.

We look around at this silver haired woman with her cane banging against the counter. The barista turns from his coffee grinder without curiosity or a sense of fear. He's instantly pissed. He didn't know there was an old lady at the end of that stick forcing him out of his thoughts. Probably thinking about whether or not mustache wax is a viable statement anymore. That's what I don't like about Yankees. They're quick to the draw.

"I ordered a coffee without milk or sugar because I'm on a special diet, and you ignored my request. Are you the manager of this dive?"

"Yeah, I am," He calls back to her, "So why don't you go eat your dead husband's anus and get out of my coffee shop!"

As the woman spills her salivated coffee onto the floor and crushes the cup with her cane, I wonder if this is staged. There're people who hop on subways to sing, dance, or perform skits for money, so why not in a business? No, that wrinkled sack of cartilage heaving her bones out the door is not a paid actress but rather a disgruntled customer. I'd expect that occasionally in a Walmart, but in a cafe?

"Your face," David says, "Is somehow paler than before."

"That didn't just happen."

"Oh, but it did. How are you a writer, yet you've experienced so little of the world?"

"I don't write reality."

"Then your novel is about Southern gentlemen dueling and courting rich teenage girls?"

"If I had a problem with my coffee I wouldn't take it out on the barista."

"Okay," David nudges my cup, "Who would you complain to? The cashier?"

"Yeah."

"Then you go try and see how that goes."

"No?"

"You have writer's block, right? Tim, I don't know your life, but it seems like your problem is a lack of one. You're this little know-it-all from a small town in Georgia who may or may not be a shitty writer, but your situation is so much better than you're making it. It's an opportunity, and I'm not going to let you stare at the wall in your apartment all day when you could experience a new life and gain inspiration from things like this. Now stand up, and go be an asshole to that cashier!"

I can't process the truth that David dropped on me like an Acme ton brick, so I follow his instructions and cut in front of the line to meet the cashier I didn't bother to acknowledge as a

person before. She was merely the entity taking my order, and then I turned away forgetting her existence. Now I'm more reluctant because I see a young girl, probably in college studying photography while living in a dorm with other girls with dreams that haven't died in the crushing reality they face after graduation, and I'm about to make up some crap about my coffee just to see what happens.

"There's a line!" The customer at the counter says.

"Shut up," I say. "Ma'am?"

"Yeah?" The cashier says.

"*Yeah*?" I ask. "That's your response? Not *how can I help you?* or *hello*?"

"What do you want?"

"Your barista got cum in my coffee."

Behind me, I hear David's laughter. The guy to my right who sounded so outraged that I'd break in line doesn't know what to say. But the cashier looks at me as if I'm a comedian bombing on stage. In New York, that's worse than a train wreck. The cringe factor outweighs the debris mixed with flesh and bones scattered amongst the wreckage.

"What?"

"The dude making the coffee," I point, "Jerked off into the cup before pouring it from whatever it is you call that thing over there."

"Chas?" She turns to the goatee wearing barista.

With a turtleneck soaking up the steam and sweat from the contraption Chas pours the coffee from, this guy weighs about one-oh-five. His face makes him look six-foot-six with the Lucifer beard under his chin pointing to Hell.

"Why'd you get cum in my coffee, Chas?" I ask.

"Ha," He stands there wondering if he should jump over the counter. "Stop bothering me."

"Do you always treat your customers like this?" I ask. "I didn't pay for the jizz. Do I owe you anything?"

"Funny guy. You told your joke. Now get out."

"I heard you yell at that old lady, and you probably sodomized her coffee too!"

"I don't have a spare second to hear this shit," He throws up his hands. "Get out!"

"So, you're saying the semen was free?" I ask. "I didn't order it though."

"Your wife did when she came in this morning."

"Did you just assume my sexuality?" I stand back. "David, did you hear that?"

"Oh, so you're a fag!" He shouts.

Everyone in the coffee shop drops character when they hear the homophobic hipster spewing hate sewage. David, out of breath from laughing, pulls me away from the counter and we're back outside as if running a camera unit shooting the last scene of the film where everyone's frozen. My joke wasn't funny and it went on too long, but I would say every word I know for semen just to hear him say *fag* again so the social justice warriors would attack him on Yelp. I might write a review as well.

"That was gross," David says, "But a start."

"For what?" I ask.

"Your next book."

"I wouldn't write something like that," I say.

"Why not? It was good. Just abject."

I have writer's block because I'm conflicted about writing what a publisher wants versus what I enjoy. Writing shouldn't feel like work. It's a pleasurable escape from reality. Why would I write something I experienced? Every amateur in my writing classes would say, "This actually happened to me," after reading from their unformatted short stories. No one cares. If you don't have enough imagination to lie and make something unique up, why bother?

"Tell you what," David says. "You're new here and have no friends. You probably didn't have friends back in Georgia. We're going to change that. Every day, I'm taking your ass out into this city, and you'll have a novel by the end of the year."

"Or I'll end up working as a bag boy in a Vietnamese grocery store," I say.

"Are you a Yankee's fan?"

David stops and points at a black door without any sign or address. There's a window with neon signs that haven't worked since the mid-nineties with cigarette clouds battling one another against the glass. We go inside to see what resembles a sports bar, but is actually the last place I want to be.

Yankees signs, pictures, and baseball uniforms line the walls as if covering holes so the cold doesn't leak in. A CRT television threatens to fall on the next person who walks by as it runs a VHS tape of some game from either yesterday or fifteen years ago. David leads me to the bar where men of various builds watch the screen and talk amongst their brews.

"It's a little early for a drink," I say.

"Not for a Yankees fan," David says. "What'd you want?"

"Isn't he going to ask us?" I point at the bartender.

"Oh, right. You still don't get it, do you?"

The bartender chats with a Norm Peterson type while polishing a glass. *Cheers* was a clean bar that happened to be in a basement. You didn't walk in worrying if you'd walk back out. But that's fiction. This place is above ground and I'm not sure if it's dangerous. New places with old, hardened faces make me cautious.

David slaps the bar and the barkeep nods while holding up a finger. In Georgia, I would wait until the bartender came over without worrying if he ever would. A customer shows up, someone greets them and asks them what they want. It's a common exchange. But David hitting the bar like a cow's ass makes me wonder how long we'd be here if he hadn't.

And when he does come over, the bartender doesn't open with a *what'll it be guys?* or even a *yeah, what?*. Instead, he looks at us, and David orders a Jack and Coke.

"Just black coffee, please," I say.

"Why are you so polite, Tim?" David asks.

"Courtesy," I shrug. "The golden rule?"

"People in this city don't care about you or anyone else they pass on the street. They want to get to where they're going, in and out, as quickly as possible, all the while avoiding weirdos like us.

You're worried about the *golden rule*? If you want something, take it or make someone else bring it to you."

"I don't want to be that way," I say.

"Then you're stuck being the famous writer's husband," David says. "I hope you're content with that."

Taking his drink from the bar, David walks to the bathroom, and I'm a dog on a leash without his owner. I'm used to going to work in a kitchen, coming home at 1:30, writing for an hour, sitting on the couch, eating, and going to bed. That's not my ideal life, but it was mine.

Someone takes David's seat, and though I want it to be David, it's instead a blond bearded man with a Yankees cap and a pair of shorts that don't fit him anymore. Maybe they never did. Without assaulting the bartender, he gets a drink and they talk as if he's a regular, so maybe I'm safe from his inevitable tornado of sports talk.

"How ya doin there, big guy?" He hits me in the back in some Viking gesture.

"I'm here."

"Hey, what's that accent? Where ya from?"

"Georgia."

"Aye, everybody, looks like we got a Georgia cracker in our midst!"

Some guys behind us cheer, others look over to see why this douche is being so loud, or so I gather. I'm one for a laugh, though. There're times when I take myself too seriously, which is a quality I despise in others. It's usually my writing that gets me upset, or rather my image as a writer, but why care about who I am? I'm not important, and even less significant in New York than Georgia. If a room full of strangers want to laugh at me, then I should go along with the joke.

"How about them Yankees, cracker boy?" He asks.

"I'm not really into baseball," I say.

"Don't tell me you're a Braves fan?" He leans back. "We got ourselves a civilized team up here, boy! Leave that shitkickin' down South where it belongs."

"I don't like the Braves either," I say. "I've never watched a game."

"The Yankees had a good season, so the next time your Braves come up from Hotlanta, make sure they wipe their feet at the door. We don't need you rednecks dirtying up our field!"

The crowd around me sort of lets out a roar akin to a box of hungry kittens. But this guy has his support, and David's taking a dump while sipping on his drink. The belly hanging over the Yankee fan's belt tells me he's no ball player, though. He's a spectator who takes the game too seriously when it doesn't affect anyone but the celebrities on the field. They lose games and still make more than he and me. To these people, baseball is life, but their lives must possess some meaning outside a bunch of muscled men throwing around a ball.

"I don't watch baseball," I say. "And I don't waste my time sitting on a barstool talking about it. When was the last time you read a book, pal?"

"Listen," He holds up a swollen finger.

"What is your life outside of this place? Do you talk about anything besides sports? Is your existence so menial that you have to live vicariously through a bunch of jocks chasing a ball? When was the last time you threw a baseball, man?"

"What's your problem, Rhett?"

"You're the one with the problem, bambino! I can actually hold a conversation about something other than who's going to win a game no one will remember next year! You wanna talk about William Blake? You wanna talk about Akira Kurosawa? How about the next season of *Walking Dead*? Can you even tell me what you're going to have for lunch? Because I'd rather discuss anything but baseball right now!"

"Alright, Rhett," He gets off the stool, "Have a nice day."

David reappears with an empty glass and furrowed brow. Everyone in the bar is looking at us. I managed to do the opposite of blending in by ranting at some stranger trying to make conversation. Maybe I'm irrational and need to reevaluate who I am as a person more than a writer.

The bartender walks over.

"What's your problem?" He asks. "You don't like the Yankees?"

This place lacks the magic people talk about. New York isn't a town where you can make it. For every new star rising, there's a million guys like the ones in this bar without a life. They latch onto something like baseball and don't evolve as people. But how am I changing? I used to be in school and had a purpose. Making the grades, writing my essays, and going to classes. Outside of that, I did whatever I wanted at home. When I started working, I felt more alienated. Getting up early to work eight hours and go home without the energy to do anything but sit on my ass didn't seem like a life anymore.

Around page forty of a novel, something big should happen. A turning point in the plot. We have our conflict that gives our plot flavor that leads to a climax, which eventually falls into a resolution. The good guys are supposed to win, so the audience can put the book down and feel hopeful. But I never read books with commercial potential. They got by on the author's talent. When my writing professor told me this rule, I flipped through *Women* by Bukowski, and he certainly never gave a shit about the rules. But when I peeked at *Imperial Bedrooms*, Bret Easton Ellis introduced Rain Turner as potential prey for Clay, who is a film producer. Clay's realization that Turner is over-ripened and won't make it in Hollywood as an actress conflicts with his admiration for her beauty. On page forty, Ellis outlines what makes for most of the book's conflict.

Life isn't a novel, but I'm always looking out for what will be my page forty. I do know that I'll never write a worthwhile book if I stay in my apartment and fear New York. Going out by myself is suicide, so I have to be friends with David, and I have to experience a life outside of my own.

After getting kicked out of the bar for not being Yankees fans, David comes up to my apartment and I let him read my manuscript. An outsider's opinion can't hurt, especially if he won't jerk me around like Avery or Claire. I can't trust them to tell me the truth or properly represent the public's point of view.

And when David closes the laptop screen, holding his head in his palms, I know I messed up something.

"So?" I ask.

"Look, Tim," He swirls around in the office chair, "You're not a bad writer. You're educated, you've read all of these different authors and books, so you know what makes for good and bad writing. But all I'm getting from this is... a person living their life."

"What are you talking about?"

Some people complain that my writing doesn't follow a plot or a story. I focus on the character, so other writers presume I'm writing a character analysis. But there is a point to *Dead Man's Handle*. This guy, Thorn, who obsesses over trains and Tom Waits, works the worst job a qualified professional could. He pumps dead bodies full of formaldehyde, removes their eyes, sews orifices shut, and treats humans who once had souls as if they were dolls. He comes home to his vinyl albums, bowler caps, and photographs he took of trains as if he's a normal person, but he's an outsider without friends or a partner. To me, that's more interesting than a romance novel called *Antlers*.

"You're not going anywhere," David says. "Give him a girlfriend or make him find a dead dog that makes him have an epiphany. Something has to change."

"He doesn't change. The world does."

"Because the world doesn't care, but he should."

That's what I'm missing in all of this. Only a couple of weeks ago, I was in that hospital kitchen with bleach staining my scrubs and eating through my skin. The reality of working for eight dollars an hour versus going to classes and writing essays hit me harder than a dose of kryptonite. I felt like a failure when I had a job, and now I have free reign of New York and a wife with a book deal, and I don't feel like a lesser one. I know the world doesn't care about me, but I should change how I take care of myself. I'm the only one in control of what happens to me next.

"Let's go," I say. "Take me somewhere exciting."

Every other movie set in New York has an apartment building with rotting wood falling off the walls with babies crying in the stairwell as their mothers smoke cigarettes and give protagonists death glares. Someone is yelling in the background, and once the camera makes it to the top of the stairwell, the main character knocks on a door, and whoever answers is usually a catalyst to a plot point. They're the guy who knows a guy.

This guy looks like he knows a lot of people, but no one of use to me. He's David's drug dealer, and he goes by Yankee Doodle. With natural, unwashed blond hair combed up almost like a flattop, a yellow stained wife beater, and a biohazard symbol on his left arm, I wouldn't trust this man with any controlled substance. Before we arrived, David briefed me on how Yankee Doodle supplies crack, meth, and any prescription drug you can name to the mafia. He met Yankee while working mob owned clubs.

"We're trying to get my new friend, Tim, out of his funk," David says. "Do you have any fun clients lined up in your roster today?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Yankee nods. "I got your Al Deniro Robert Pacino fix coming. In about ten, this dude who picks up for Kenny Martinelli is coming over. Name's Francisco."

"Does this Francisco drive a black Lincoln, wear a black suit, and have jet black hair?" I ask.

"Hey, Davey, I thought you were the comedian. Keep your face shut when Francisco's here, Timmy."

David winks at me while Yankee Doodle walks backwards in his office chair and reaches behind a bookcase full of thrift shop treasures like *Fire in the Engine Room* and *Cooking With Grandpa* and wheeling back to the table with a prescription bottle. I want to ask what the pills are, but Yankee Doodle isn't being a dandy right now.

There's a knock, so our dealer friend knocks back on the table to the rhythm of "Under Pressure," as a signal. A pale man in a Hawaiian shirt enters with an envelope. He looks at me for a moment, then at David.

"Francisco," Yankee says, "Here you go go."

"Since when do you have colleagues?" Francisco asks. "You."

The pokes me in the shoulder and pulls out a revolver, which makes all the blood in my head rush down to my toes. We're going to get shot because David never thought we might get mistaken for cops.

"This gun is registered in my name," He says. "It's legal. If I point it at you, am I going to get arrested for assaulting a police officer?"

"They're not fucking cops," Yankee says.

He puts the barrel to my head and spins the chamber. If he's about to play Russian Roulette with me, I wish he'd done it before I moved up here so my mother could afford to bury me.

"Uhh, Mr. San Francisco?" David says. "We're just hanging out with Yankee. If you want us to leave, we'll go."

"What are you?" He asks. "You don't look Italian."

"I'm a fifth generation American," I say. "I don't know what the hell I am otherwise."

"Oh yeah? I'm third generation. My great-grandfather came over from Rome. You ever been?"

"I've barely been to New York."

Francisco withdraws his revolver and nods. Tossing the envelope on the table, he grabs the pill bottle and opens the top to have a look. He looks down at me and pinches my cheek, blows a kiss to Yankee, and walks back out. My testicles have never retracted so far into my body.

"What the fuck was that?" I exhale.

"Hey," Yankee shrugs.

"Hey?" I ask.

Walking over to the door, I bolt the lock and grab a cork screw on the counter. Yankee's laughing because he doesn't believe I'm about to do this, but I grab his left ear and take the sharp end of the screw and scrape his cheek in a hard stroke. This city thinks because I have a Southern accent that I'm dumb and therefore culpable to disrespect. If I ever see the taxi driver that hit my car, I'm going to wrap my hands around his throat and spit in his face before he passes out.

"Tim, why are you being a psycho?" David walks around the table.

"Because fuck this asshole for letting that happen."

"Jesus, come on," He pulls me away.

"Why'd you scratch me?" Yankee feels his cheek. "Damn. I have to put something on this."

I agree when people say violence isn't justified, yet I don't care sometimes. I'm not the type to hit a woman, but men can do some dumb shit. If your buddy makes a remark about your wife's ass, you might punch him in the shoulder. He won't do it again after that. I doubt I'll ever see Yankee Doodle again, so I want him to remember me. I hope that scratch turns into a thin scar.

David tosses up his hands and pulls out a cigarette. As we stand on the sidewalk, I watch a group of Hasidic Jews with tiny curls and long beards walk across the street. That's more Jews than I've ever seen. In my home town, we didn't have a temple. There was one Jewish lady who looked like a pirate and she'd point with her curved finger for you to get out of her way in the library parking lot. The local newspaper did an editorial about her my mother showed me because she worked at my school, and I rolled my eyes because no one's important enough to have an article written on them if they just live in our small town. Everyone there wanted it to be something it wasn't.

"My dad's Jewish," David says. "My mom's Catholic."

"What are you then?" I ask.

"I don't know. Is this really the conversation to have after you attack my dealer?"

"Sorry," I say.

"You don't mean that. You shouldn't mean it. He's an asshole, and every single dealer in this city is an asshole. I'm an asshole. You're an asshole. Yet we still hold our noses when shit comes out."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that if there's a God, then he probably laughs at us wondering why we haven't figured this out yet."

After taking a final drag, David stamps out his cigarette and we start walking. A homeless man walks past us without asking for money, so we must look homeless too. Do homeless people try to bum money off each other? Maybe he doesn't need money and he sees that we don't have any

food. Would he bother us if he had a McDonald's sack? I bother everyone when they have a McDonald's sack. I want to inhale that classic odor and bask in the salty glory.

"You believe in a God or something?" David asks.

"I think so," I say. "I just don't think he cares."

"What'd you mean?"

"Alright, so there's happiness, wealth, and good health. There're also children with cancer, people who have severe depression, poverty, and starvation. What's God responsible for?"

We stop at the crosswalk and David shakes his head. What else should we talk about? Trying to fit breasts into tea cups?

"There're some shitty rich people," David said, "And good poor people. Those dying children you mentioned? They're the reason I question if there's a God. Why would a divine power allow that kind of suffering?"

"The same reason he lets awful men get rich. He either doesn't care or lets things happen as they happen."

"Is that how you feel about Claire? She's getting that big book release and you're stuck in New York because you didn't want to divorce her?"

How do I feel about Claire? With her new career in my passion, it feels like she stole my dream and ran away. I still sleep next to her on most nights, yet I might as well sleep next to a stranger. She dragged me here knowing that I never wanted to leave Georgia. During this whole thing, she's neglected us. Why'd she bother taking me along if I barely see her? Our conversations are her talking at me, and I'm always a little passive aggressive bitch.

"The difference is that if God exists, we're all married to him," I say. "There's no divorcing him unless you want to burn in Hell for eternity. I really don't know about Claire. I guess... I feel like I can't function without her. She's my crutch, and I'm dependent. I'm delaying her leaving me by following her wherever she wants me to."

"You have a lot of writing material," He says. "I think you're more afraid of what you'll discover if you write something real, Tim."

"I'm so boring. Why would I write about me?"

"Bukowski was a drunk who worked at the post office, and you can go into the Barnes and Noble to see the results."

Of all the people to reference. Bukowski romanticized the whole notion of writing by removing the romance. I stare at my keyboard wondering how to make this shit real. Give it grit and remove the rough edges just enough to come off as cool. All writers want you to think they're cool. Unfortunately, we're a bunch of geeks.

"Do you want to get some lunch or donuts?" David asks. "I think we need to eat something that'll kill us."

"I don't think Tom Waits ever sang a song about donuts," I say, "But they're dangerous."

Tonight, I'm alone in the apartment again. There's nothing on Netflix I want to watch, and I can't bring myself to write anything worthwhile. I should've done that before I spent so many years working on the same novel. I guess I had fun with David today, and I didn't think too much about Claire. Now that I'm inside my head, there's nothing else to think about.

I know that I'm overanalyzing our relationship and this leads to negative thoughts which might lead me to act like I wouldn't normally. Without a single text from her explaining where she is, I could send a passive aggressive message and turn off my phone. Maybe wait for her with the lights off. Cradling my temple and staring at the couch fabric, I'm lost by myself and looking for direction in the patterns.

I guess all the time I spent writing and working on my relationship with Claire left me without a life of my own. If I open the window, climb onto the fire escape, go to the top, and jump off the roof, how long before Claire moves on? Will she text a man who'll come over and fuck her? Live how she wanted without me? It would break my mother's heart, but I'm not the nicest son. Not a total loss.

There're times when I start writing a suicide note and talk myself out of it by the time I'm through. I cry, curl up into a ball, wondering when I'll stop hurting. I probably think about killing myself at least once a day. All the problems and pain go away forever, but so does hope. Once you arrive at your destination, do you want to go back to the journey? In death, there's no reflection. Just complete darkness.

Instead, I turn on the box fan in the bedroom, pull down the comforter, and find some spark when I feel the sheets against my legs. Going to bed as an adult is like ice cream during recess. When I worked in the kitchen, my life revolved around when I went to bed. If sleep is so important, then why aren't we all sleeping in?

Claire's not here when I wake up. I check my phone and she's texted that she'll be in early today, but it's eleven-thirty. She's going out of her way to avoid me, because she can't be that busy. Some marriage I have.

I open the door to let David in, and he's cradling two subs from Jimmy Johns. Somehow, he figured out that I like the Italian with pickles. He has nothing to do with his life just like me, so why wouldn't he know? We're biting into the sandwiches when Claire and Avery come in.

"Oh look, he has a boyfriend," Avery says.

"You made a friend?" Claire says.

"David Louis," David waves.

"Didn't you write for 30 Rock?" Avery asks. "I've seen your name before."

"Don't insult me while I'm eating," David says.

My wife and her agent decide to continue their conversation on the couch while we're eating only a few feet away. I can think of ruder actions. Normally, David and I might sit in silence out of politeness.

"So far," Avery says, "Everyone likes your accent. Maybe play it up? Like a Paula Deen sort of thing?"

"I'd rather not have an accent at all," Claire says. "I don't want to come off as stupid."

"Or a racist," David says.

"Well hold on," Avery says. "What do you think would sell, David?"

"A Confederate flag tattooed to her chest with a camo tank top."

"See, Claire. The world has expectations of you because of where you're from. We could find you a simple dress with the UGA logo for the NBC interview."

"Why not just say she voted for Trump?" David says.

"She only went to Georgia one year," I say. "Nobody's heard of West Georgia."

"You two," Avery says, "Are a couple of catty bitches. Claire, I will let you have the rest of the day off, but I'll see you in the morning."

Almost as dainty as he arrived, Avery walks out in his ugly gray suit and outdated haircut. Claire reaches over to the table and grabs my sandwich.

"Did you not offer our guests any refreshment?" Claire asks.

"I can see why he mentioned Paula Deen," David says. "Tim, you nasty dog. Go in that kitchen and pour us some lemonade."

"That's disgusting," I say.

"I'm impressed that Tim made a friend," Claire says. "I guess going from zero friends to one is a one-hundred percent improvement."

"Well, you're his friend," David says.

"You must be a writer too."

"Sure. I also live off the government."

"And I haven't had any sleep," Claire says. "So I'm going to take a nap."

Claire leans over and kisses my cheek before disappearing into the bedroom. Golly, I hope we don't keep her away with our constant banter.

"I once slept with a hairy, callus-handed hooker more considerate than her," David says.

"I think she'll come back to Earth when the book comes out."

"What about her next book?" David asks. "The one after that?"

I expect her to fail. *Antlers* is not even decent upmarket fiction. People who read that book are going to take it back to Target for a little book of poetry and ink drawings, because Claire's writing is that bad. If she's a success, then I hope she doesn't forget about us. I'm thinking she will, though.

"She could do a lot better than me," I say. "She could've annulled our marriage the morning after we shacked up."

"You think she's going to leave you?"

"Part of me expects it, but here I am in New York. She had a big exit sign she couldn't noticed. I didn't have to come up here."

"Good luck. Are you going to wait around for her to wake up?"

"You wanna do something?"

There's a picture of Claire and Louise Erdrich stuck to my cubicle wall. Anytime my manager, Weldon, looks at my desktop and points with a question about what I'm doing, I look at Claire's smile. I also keep a photo of Bukowski tacked up to remind myself that I might not be published until I'm fifty. That might require some talent on my part, though. I haven't written a word since we moved here, so my chances diminish as I grew used to this computer screen reflecting numbers at me.

I didn't have to get a job, of course. Since Claire went on her book tour, I figured I needed something to occupy my time. David started doing stand up again, so I drop by the Comedy Cellar to see him whenever he's got a set. Sometimes he impersonates me with a Southern accent that would make Buck Owens weep.

The best part of living alone in this apartment is never having to see Avery. That shithead wouldn't know a good book if Kurt Vonnegut shoved *Cat's Cradle* in his anus. I flushed turds with more creative expertise than Avery. If Claire hadn't caught his attention, I would be in Georgia with the heat and humidity warming my balls instead of this New York winter forcing me to wear two pairs of boxers.

While I'm adjusting numbers on a claim, my pants vibrate. Mr. Shithead's calling me, so he must want to brag about Claire's next book already getting Tarantino for the movie adaptation before she's even written the thing.

"What?" I answer.

"Tim, do you have a lunch break or something coming up?"

"I shouldn't even be on my phone right now."

"When do you get off?"

"I have to pick Claire up from the airport," I say. "It would be nice if I could spend some time with her, you know?"

"We'll go together. I have news."

When people say they're going to talk to me about something later, I want to put firecrackers in my ears. Why did Avery do that? My entire afternoon's going to be a see-saw of wondering what news he's going to break to me.

I wait outside the office building in my leather jacket and wish I had a Starbucks chai latte. Avery pulls up in a BMW, which I hope is a lease. No literary agent should drive that kind of car. When I get in, he's got the heat going full blast as if he wants to bake me.

"How's work?" He asks.

"You wanted to talk to me," I say.

"Did you know about this interview Claire did with Atlanta Journal?"

"I didn't even know she was in Atlanta."

Why didn't she fly me down? I could've visited my mother and pleaded with Claire to move back. There's no reason for us to be here anymore. She can live wherever she wants.

"They gave me a heads up before they published it," Avery says. "Hughes is pissed. He's thinking about breaching her contract."

"Why?"

I'm not so angry about living in New York that I'd hope Claire lost her publishing deal. After *Antlers*, Avery guaranteed two more books in her contract. Even if her debut flopped, she had another chance. Instead, *Antlers* made the New York Time's bestsellers list, which still sounds like a bad Lifetime movie plot point. How'd this book get this big? Avery hyped the shit out of it.

"She said you helped her write *Antlers*," Avery says. "That means Hughes approved a book for publication with inaccurate credits. I didn't know, but she admitted it to me. Tim, why didn't you ever tell me?"

"I didn't write that book," I say. "It's hers."

"She says you actually sat in front of her and rewrote portions of it."

"Sure," I say. "Doesn't make it mine."

"She also says you fixed plot holes, punched up dialogue, and came up with the ending."

"Still, what does it matter?"

"You're entitled to a co-author credit, and she admitted that in a paper the Associated Press frequently reprints. Not to mention, her subreddit is going berserk. People on Twitter are calling her a fraud. It's a whole crap storm, and I have an out."

Reaching into his console, Avery pulls out a check addressed to me with a five and four zeros. I can't read the signature, but it isn't Avery's handwriting.

"I made a deal with Hughes," Avery says. "He wants *Dead Man's Handle*. They're printing a new second edition of *Antlers* with an acknowledgement of your involvement in the forward, but Hughes wants your book with both of your names."

"Jesus, Avery, you're a shitty agent. Why didn't you get me this deal when you represented me? And how could you try to pass off my book as Claire's book? I wrote *Dead Man's Handle*. Not Claire."

"That's fifty-thousand dollars, Tim. He wouldn't give you a penny for that book until I put it on the table today."

While I want the money, and my book to see store shelves, I didn't want Claire's name on the cover. True, I helped her along with *Antlers*, but that's like putting band aids on a train wreck. I didn't want to take credit for a bad book.

"No," I say. "I'm not doing this."

Avery swerves when I rip the check up and let it fall in the foot well. I am not against selling out, but this deal was made behind my back. Avery stopped being my agent the day he signed Claire, because she doesn't have the talent to write another book without me. He'll find that out soon when she turns in the second one.

"Tim," Avery says, "Why do you have to be such a jerk?"

"Because you've ruined my life, Avery. I never wanted to move to New York. I didn't want to sleep without my wife next to me. She's the only sweet spot in my existence, and you keep pulling her from me."

"She might not appreciate you throwing away her last chance. If you don't take this offer, she's done."

I want to upload *Dead Man's Handle* to Amazon Kindle just to fuck with Avery. Claire needs a better agent if she's selling out so much people can't find her book in stores. Surely he can make a more ethical deal than offering my manuscript for her next release?

"Come up with a better deal," I say. "Or I'm going to talk to Claire about finding a new agent."

"I'm still your agent, Tim," Avery says. "This benefits all of us."

"When Claire gets in this car, I will stab you if you say anything."

"Excuse me?"

"I will take the nearest sharp object and ram it into your body, Avery," I say.

"Fine. We'll all talk about it once Claire's settled in, but Hughes is only giving us forty-eight hours, and he's still printing your name in *Antlers*."

I want to believe Claire won't accept my book as her own, because *Antlers* was her concept. I fixed a lot of issues, but I would've rewritten it entirely if I knew my name would be in the first few pages. David pointed out issues with *Dead Man's Handle* I probably need to fix too. If I trusted Claire's judgement, I might let her plot out the girlfriend, dead dog, or whatever David suggested.

She's got her hair up with a scarf around her tall neck. I kiss her forehead before tossing her bag into the trunk and open the passenger door to let her in. Figure I'll sit in the back for this ride in the even I need to slit Avery's throat. He remains quiet, and Claire's leaning against her window as the snow sticks and melts on the glass.

When we're back in the apartment, alone for the first time in two months, Claire lays down on the couch and shuts her eyes. I don't want to interrupt, but I want to talk to her before Avery does.

"I'd ask about your trip," I say, "But I already know it was amazing."

"Mmm hmm."

"Avery told me about Hughes and your AJC interview."

She looks at me with a faint smirk and shrugs. Did she bomb that interview on purpose? Maybe the tour got tiresome? Perhaps she realizes I feel lonely and neglected? That might require some empathy on her part.

"Why'd you admit to that?" I ask. "I didn't write your book."

"I couldn't have written it by myself," She says. "I only wrote because I wanted to impress you."

"That seems a little dishonest. Why would you want to publish a book to win me over? We're married."

"Because I feel like we're not married. It's like we're playing pretend, and you're going to realize we're different, and you'll leave."

"I'm not going to leave you," I say. "I thought about it because I hate New York. I hate the way you're always gone. Neither of us knew this would happen, though."

"Well, I know I fucked up, Tim. I don't regret the book or this career, and I wouldn't change what I've done, but it would be unfair to you if I carried on like a little girl in the big city when you fixed my mess."

Now I feel like an asshole, because she got everything she wanted. I'm her husband and should take priority like she takes priority in my life, but my passive aggression wasn't warranted. Maybe I should be nicer to Avery too?

"Avery tried to buy me off on the way to the airport. Hughes offered me fifty thousand for *Dead Man's Handle* if they can put your name on it above mine."

"You probably ripped up the check and threw it in his face."

"Close," I say. "What do you think? Hughes said he wants to tear up your contract over this if I don't get proper credit."

"Why didn't you suggest the obvious? Let's write a new book together."

That didn't come to mind because I figured Claire was incapable. Now she's got a good idea, and I'm an asshole again. I have to ask myself if she's intelligent or not. Right now, she sounds smarter than me.

"Remember your idea for *Ramhorns*?" Claire asks. "Let's drop the title and make a gritty sequel."

"Tree branches?" I ask. "Split ends?"

"How'd you get the name for your book?"

"It's a Richard Thompson song."

Claire pulls out her iPhone and begins typing, and I hope she's only brainstorming titles and not texting Avery. I'm not in love with writing a sequel, though I don't want to write it at all. Why wouldn't I want to collaborate with my wife on something, though?

"I texted Mr. Hughes," She says. "Let's see what he says."

"You're going to piss of your agent," I say.

"He'll still get his percentage until my contract's up, and he should've come up with a better deal."

Going over Avery straight to Hughes is akin to sneaking cookies to the president so he'll grant you immunity. If Hughes accepts Claire's idea, then Avery's reputation lands in a polluted river without someone flushing him. Leveraging my book to save Claire's career was a ploy to guarantee himself more money anyway.

"Well, now we have to wait," Claire says. "Do you mind if I go take a nap? We can get dinner when I wake up."

"Sure," I say. "I'll go talk to David."

My friend doesn't answer his door but I hear a groan from the inside. Is he getting laid or jerking off? Does he make that noise with the bathroom door open? I try the handle only intending to poke my head in, and I see Jeff from across the hallway massaging a shirtless David.

"Whoh," David waves, "Tim! Come on in."

"Am I..." I say. "Are you two...?"

"We're giving each other back rubs. I can do you while Jeff does me."

"You know what," I say, "I'll go for a walk."

"Hey, don't be homophobic. You know you want in on this love train."

"I needed to talk," I say. "Besides, I didn't bring any protection."

Jeff rolls his eyes, pulls his jacket over his hairy back, and pushes past me into the hallway. David, rather than chasing his buddy, leans back on the sofa and props his ginger feet on the armrest.

"Well?" He asks.

I shut the door and remain standing with a distance between us. I'm not against whatever was going on, but I wasn't expecting that scene. I know David was lonely, but how desperate does a man get before he invites his neighbor over for touchy feely?

"I tore up a fifty-thousand dollar check in a BMW about thirty minutes ago," I say.

"You asshole," David says. "Do you know what that money will buy? You ever dig into your couch cushions for quarters just to buy honey buns before?"

"Sure," I say. "50k is a lot of ramen noodles. But Avery wanted to pawn off my book as Claire's own."

"Oh yeah," David points, "I read about you writing her book."

"I didn't writing her fucking book," I say. "Even she's saying I wrote it. I just helped."

"Hey, if I help someone write a movie, I'm lucky to get five bucks in the mail. I've never even seen fifty-thousand dollars."

"Well, now Claire wants us to write another book instead. I don't think I can tolerate it."

"Listen to you," David says. "*I don't think I can tolerate it. My wife is a rich writer in New York and I'm sad because I'm not.* Do you want me to marry her? I'll go in there right now and put a red headed baby in her right now."

I realize my plight appears miniscule in comparison to David succumbing to his curiosity or binging on pizza he can't afford until he has an ulcer. Claire's probably more talented than me and I'm too pompous to notice. She's the one with the publishing contract for two more books.

"Write her a new book, Tim," David says. "She'll knock off her act. She'll give you the reach around when she makes sweet love to your honey buns."

"That's not crass at all," I say. "You should write a book of sexual metaphors. They'll pass it out in schools to promote abstinence."

"Not a terrible idea. While I'm working on that, you can get over there and pound one out on your little MacBook while crying to Smiths audiophile grade vinyl albums on a fifty dollar turntable you bought from Wal Mart."

Why did I come over here? David's my cracked out cricket. I can write a book like *Antlers* in four weeks if I work every day, eat two meals a day, and take minimal bathroom breaks. My sleep schedule might promote some flavor in the dry romantic nonsense.

"Are you doing a set tonight?" I ask.

"Nah," David says. "I got a call from my manager. She's got me a spot on Kimmel."

"No shit," I say. "That's fantastic, man."

"I feel like I'm selling my soul."

"Look in the mirror and say that after what you just said to me."

My phone vibrates, and I don't recognize the caller. David motions for me to answer, so as long as they don't ask *Is this Timothy?* I should be fine.

"Tim, this is Hughes. I haven't responded to your wife's text yet, but Avery told me what you did with the check I wrote you."

"Yes, sir," I say. "I tore it up."

Am I in the principal's office again? Anxiety wraps around my spinal cord as I clench my butt cheeks and prepare for Hughes to yell or tell me I'll never be published. Tearing up that check may've nailed the final spike in our pine box.

"Do you know how many men I handed a five figure check to who refused me?"

"I really couldn't say," I breathe.

"One," Hughes says. "That's you, Tim. What's the minimum wage in Atlanta? Seven bucks and a quarter? You'd have to work sixty hours just to make twenty-grand in a year. Someone down on their luck would bludgeon you for that money. Either you're a crazy asshole, or you have some kind of code like you're Batman flying through the skies."

"Sir, I didn't write Claire's book. I helped some, but that's not my book, and despite that she's my wife, I can't stand by the quality. The book Avery offered you belongs to me. Claire wouldn't write something like that."

"I told Avery that printing a book with the wrong credits makes me look like a liar. It makes him look like a liar too, because he represented you before Claire. I want to know why he never showed me your manuscript until this morning. I read through it, and I'm not saying you're Faulkner, but you're marketable. To a certain group."

Avery probably never liked *Dead Man's Handle*. He's spent so much time with Claire, I don't believe he has any other clients. It's unusual for a literary agent to even meet their client in person these days.

"Here's my idea," Hughes says. "If you write the next *Antlers* with Claire, I'll print the same acknowledgement I'm having put in all the new editions. Your book, once my editors run through it, will be printed as the third book in her contract. It may not seem fair to her, but she has other opportunities. What your wife, and yourself, should do is hire an attorney in lieu of an agent. Cut out Avery."

"I like that," I say. "Thank you."

"Still, you're going to go on her next book tour. We've got to market this right."

"That's fine."

David raises his eyebrows when I pocket the phone. I hope Claire won't hold losing her third book against me. If this is the deal, I have to quit my job at AT&T and write a manuscript. Otherwise, she'll really be fucked.

"I don't know how I'm going to break this to her," I say.

"She should be happy for both of you," David says. "Not a lot she can do about it."

Back in our apartment, I look in at Claire sleeping. If this is our life now, I almost miss the idea of her being away and me sitting at a cubicle. Success frightens me because that means change, and I'd rather wallow in despair than try a new beginning. I want to lay next to her and be with my wife, because I haven't seen much of her this past year. Now that we'll have to work together, I fear the result.

What is writing supposed to be? What makes it good? If good and bad are subjective, then am I blind to her talent? As I have more time in the working world and have yet to recover from my writer's block, I know I'm not a great writer and *Dead Man's Handle* needs work.

I sit at the keyboard with my laptop glowing back at me, open a new Word document, and type *Atrophy* as the title. Ultimately, Claire's novel reflected us. We split apart yet remained together, and something binds us. Do we love one another enough to keep this from breaking? With so much time and distance spent away from each other, we're dissolving. When we married, I thought I might mold her into an intellectual. Took me a few years to realize I'm not that smart, and she's not dumb. Maybe we were stupid kids, and I should've appreciated her awe rather than assume I deserved it.

I have a few paragraphs before someone knocks at the door. Of course when I finally overcome my block, an interruption finds me. I look through the peep hole and see Avery.

"I'm not letting you in," I say. "I'm not waking up Claire."

"Hughes called me," Avery says. "You got your way, Tim."

"Get out of here, Avery."

"He told me I'm not getting a cent from your book since I don't represent you despite the contract. I bet that makes you feel good."

"Are you here to shoot me or something?"

"No, I know this is karma. You wrote a good book and I saw what Claire was working on and thought it was more marketable. I haven't had that kind of success before. Maybe I will again."

I'd like to grab his face and bite into his cheek, but Avery's the type to call the police and throw me in jail. He's not a drug dealer working with the mafia, either. I hope this is the last time I see him, because his presence reminds me of vomiting after too much ice cream.

"Bye, Avery," I say.

"Yeah, fuck you, Tim."

A Painter

August

Black paint stains my skin as my thumb rubs against the brush's bristles. I don't mind a little slashing on my skin. There're times when I get under a hot faucet and relish the colors distilling into the drain as gray water pools at my feet. One might believe I'm shedding skin and somehow reborn. The paint makes me who I am, though. If I could keep the colors on my skin, I might finally comprehend the beauty only a canvas knows. People age and die, but a portrait on a wall is timeless. Yes, that picture is stuck in a moment, yet everyone would give up the pleasures of life if it meant no pain and immortality.

When I look at the finished scene, my vocal cords vibrate but I don't understand what I'm saying. My teeth grind. The woman's leaning down from a chaise lounge while reaching for a paper fan. A robe just under her shoulders allows each breast enough exposure without revealing her nipples. This is glorified pornography that rich men buy from galleries, but not what I consider art.

With my clean hand, I pour some brandy into my sweating glass and take a long swig. This painting should pay for the bills this month if it sells on time. There's another piece on an easel against the back wall that I can work on a little more. Unfortunately, those passion pieces rarely get finished as often as I want. Most of my creative energy goes into the ones that sell. Sometimes I get a commission and I can name my price, though it's usually under a grand.

In my teaching days, I encountered my critics when I participated in exhibitions and college galleries displayed my work. People think they know about art because they took a few art classes in college. Critics rarely set paint to canvas, especially not in a meaningful way. Anything that challenges them is trash. These yuppies who buy my paintings now wouldn't understand my true art. A clever, careless man toying with a brush. A hand grown to the trick.

Why is the brush the only thing constant I can rely on? I buy the best canvas my budget affords, yet I waste my talent and time on something a man could find in a Playboy. They think because there's paint involved, they can hang it up and call it art. If they saw my real work like the unfinished piece, those suits would tell me to go back to school. They don't see the degrees sitting on a shelf in my closet, though. Even with those certifications, I can't paint and sell what I want.

I'm pouring the rest of the bottle into my glass when Ruth walks in behind me. Her baggy jeans rustle with every step. Her hand rests on the back of my neck and she kisses my ear. She probably heard me talking to myself, though I don't recall what I actually said.

"I'm fine with you talking to yourself," She hugs me. "It's when you talk to your brushes that makes me think you're inhaling too much paint."

"They're the only ones who'll listen."

"This one turned out good. She's prettier than me, though. Who's she based on?"

"She's not real, so of course she's pretty. You're the only identity I have in this world. No one will ever know who I really am but you."

"People say you're dependent on me, August."

Ruth rubs through my long hair and breathes against my cheek. She's finer than the art I produce. In my personal works, I chase after what makes her beautiful. A human consists of skin, blood, and bones. Attraction is not universal, and certainly not objective. Some people grow in their

beauty as they age. Youth doesn't give us anything but time to waste before we know what to do with it.

"But I don't mind," Ruth whispers.

"Darling," I say, "If not for you, I'd be sketching on fifty-cent notebooks in a soup kitchen. I paint these for us so we have a life."

"Do what you want," Ruth says. "My salary will support us. I think you worry too much about what other people say. Will you ever be happy just as you are?"

"You are my happiness. You gave up too much for me."

"I didn't give up my career like you did," Ruth says. "You're stuck with me. I have papers to grade, so get cleaned up and stop talking to yourself."

When Ruth walks out, my phone rings. Desmond manages the gallery showroom off campus near Starbucks. I sent him a picture of the finished portrait a moment ago, so he's probably got an offer from a buyer already. It took me a week to finish this, so if I get a cent over $290, I'll make more than minimum wage.

"August," Desmond opens, "Two things. First, love the portrait."

"Don't flatter me," I say. "It's pornographic garbage."

"It's tasteful garbage. Got a buyer who saw your sketch, and he wants it for four hundred."

"Alright. What's the second thing?"

"When I come get the portrait, there's someone who wants to speak with you."

"I don't like meeting the buyers, Desmond. Especially not at my house."

"It's not the buyer. See you tomorrow."

Who the hell wants to meet me? Anyway, I have less than two weeks' pay for a painting where a woman's cleavage is the focal point. Adjusting for inflation, I made more than Van Gogh ever did. Then again, he would probably call me a sell out and hand me a gun to shoot myself in the stomach.

Ruth's sitting on the couch with one of my paint stained sweatshirts, her petite toes spread on a couch cushion, and Tom Wait's "New Coat of Paint" belts from the turntable. I made a good investment marrying a woman who was born when I was just old enough to drive a car.

"Hey, boom boom," Ruth waves.

"Desmond's coming in the morning," I say. "Four hundred."

"That's great."

"I'd make more money waiting tables or flipping burgers."

"You're terrible with people, and you can't cook. Good thing you're a painter."

In the morning, Ruth wakes me up by pulling the blanket off my head and kissing my forehead. She knows I'm not above letting Desmond in while I'm in my boxers. Since I don't have a nine-to-five, I sit in bed for thirty minutes on my phone or making sketches.

Desmond should be shorter than me, but he's a little taller, and neither one of us are tall. On exhibition nights, he dresses in sweater vests, navy blazers, or silk shirts with black trousers. Today, he's chatting up a man in a much nicer suit getting out of a Mercedes. I'm pretty sure Desmond drives a Prius. A man with more hair on his face than that bald dome should always drive a Prius, and never a new one.

"Here's the painting," I hold up the canvas.

"Oh, about that," Desmond says, "The buyer called me this morning and said his wife wanted it for two-fifty."

"That's fine, I guess," I say.

"August, you're worth a lot more than two-fifty. I told him to go fuck himself."

"Two-fifty is better than zero."

"Let me see that," The suit reaches for the canvas. "It's a nice piece, Mr. Webb."

"It's an insult to my ability," I say.

"August's got a doctorate from some school in Rhode Island," Desmond says.

"And he's reduced to nudes?" The suit asks.

Why is the rich guy so interested in me? He complimented the painting, but retracted it a split-second later. Desmond must be fucking with me. Isn't it enough that I'm shorter than a pissant? I let them in despite wanting them to leave and realize I don't even have coffee to offer them since I only drink tea.

"By the way," The suit offers his hand, "I'm William."

"William Pollock," Desmond says.

They stand in my kitchen expecting me to turn a cartwheel, but I don't know who William Pollock is. Whatever he's expecting out of me will end in disappointment. Considering he's got deep pockets, I'll allow him to indulge in my pretentious artist routine if he's willing to buy that bad painting.

"Are you working on anything new you'd like to show us?" Desmond asks.

"Nothing you could sell," I say.

"Try me," William says.

We walk in my studio room where I notice a few more empty bourbon and brandy bottles than I thought lined my work table. I grab my sketch book from the floor and flip through the pages while William goes right to the canvas on the back wall. I paint Ruth from memory, and generally in different styles each time. This one has a bit of a Blue period, but more greenish gray.

"This is," William says, "Different."

"That's the point," I say.

"Do you have others like this?" He asks.

"None that you would be interested in."

"The tortured, better-than-everyone artist act. Come on, August. If you were really like that, you would be living alone in a one-room-apartment in New Jersey. You're smarter than that, but not as smart as me. This is a good piece. I want to see more."

"Maybe we should go," Desmond says. "I'm real sorry about the painting, August. I'll take it and pay you the four hundred out of my pocket."

"I'll just burn the goddamned thing," I say.

"No," William says, "I'll buy both paintings for a grand right now."

Pulling out his wallet, William starts counting out Benjamins while Desmond looks at me like I'm stinky cheese. Though I'm not going to turn down the offer, I wonder if William's doing

this to be polite and still have the upper hand. I never said I was smarter than everyone, but the tortured part isn't an act when they're in my house.

"I can get more," William says, "But my wife doesn't want me spending more than a grand a day."

"Your wife?" I ask.

"She thinks anything you can frame and hang on the wall is art. She can't tell the difference between this and Thomas Kinkade."

"You're sure?" Desmond asks.

"I still want to see more like this one, August," William says.

"Sure."

What else can I say? A man offers to buy my personal works and not a bunch of tits. How'd he find out who I am, though? Approaching my dealer and showing up here seems off.

"My wife," William says, "Art connoisseur that she is, bought one of your paintings from Desmond."

"I'll wrap these up for you," Desmond says.

"I'll keep in touch, August."

I spend the day at the kitchen table with the money and the last of my vodka. The only thing I have to eat are dollar frozen macaroni and cheese meals. They're not bad with a little salt. This money won't happen again. William isn't going to ever see me again, because his wife will look at that portrait of Ruth and tell him to return it to TJ Maxx.

A thousand dollars isn't more than what Ruth makes in a month. I'm basically an impotent guinea pig sipping my last few gulps off her tit. The hope that I won't have to paint another nude or flower again leans in my conscious, but I can't let my dreams return. When I was teaching college kids, I figured my career as an artist would flourish and I could stop going over Monet and Goddard. Instead, I lost my tenure and look like every stereotypical painter who walks into a coffee shop hoping to trick a young girl into fucking him.

Around noon, Ruth's car pulls up in the port, so I put the bottle in the trash and sit back down. She looks in the window at me before opening the door, and we look at each other for a moment.

"Creep," She says.

"You're early."

"It's my lunch. I didn't bring my sandwich today. Is all that money from the sale?"

"Could you deposit it into your account?" I ask.

"Sure," She holds the money. "All this from a chesty blond?"

"And the portrait of you."

Ruth sits at the table and counts the money before squinting at me. She probably thinks I ripped off Desmond and he's dead in his office.

"You showed that to Desmond?" She asks.

"He brought over some collector with him," I say. "William Potluck or something."

"William Pollock?"

"That's the one."

"He donates to the school. I have no idea how he gets his money, though."

"Well, he wants to see more."

"And you couldn't be more miserable," Ruth says.

Sitting in my lap and rubbing my scruff, Ruth kisses me. Her presence makes me feel foolish for my pride. Someone's finally interested in my art, and I'm so used to failure that I have to second guess him.

"You could end up making more money and supporting us the way you want," Ruth says.

"My work isn't meant to have a price tag. My work is both worthless and priceless. Art is not a comity, and I am not a whore to the cigar chokers who decorate their homes with beatnik canvases just to look more cultured."

"Well, it's one of your shorter monologues."

My phone vibrates on the table and it's Desmond again. Ruth looks at me while I'm making the slashing sign at my neck. He either wants to break bad news to me or tell me I won the lottery. Either way, this is a lie in the making.

"Yes, Desmond?" Ruth answers.

"Oh," I hear Desmond's voice break. "Hi, Ruth. August doesn't want to talk, does he?"

"He has a success phobia."

"Then he's going to pull out his hair and scream. William Pollock was with me today, and he called Marilyn Collins."

I take the phone from Ruth. Marilyn Collins taught a course on postmodern aesthetics when I was an undergrad. She's gotta be in her sixties or seventies now. There's a gallery aptly called the Glass Ballroom downtown that she supposedly runs, but I bet she's just working the front desk and hands out finger sandwiches during exhibitions.

"What about her?" I answer.

"William is putting that portrait of Ruth in the Glass Ballroom," Desmond says.

"I didn't agree to that."

"He bought it, so it's his property. It's already up."

"What the fuck, Desmond?"

"Well, I'm not your goddamn agent, August. He can do what he wants with it. I think he's trying to help you, so be a little more gracious."

"I paint for me," I say. "Not for a hundred yuppies to feel more cultured."

"More like a few thousand yuppies. There's a party tonight. You're not invited, though. I'll be there. If you're nice to me, I'll take a selfie with her and William."

Desmond thinks he's charming. When I show up at the Glass Bathhouse, I'm going to throw a few stones. That sounds stupid even in my head. After this, I can't deal with Desmond anymore. I'm going to get my vitae together and go teach at a community college. That's more income than my paintings bring in anyway.

I take an Uber to the gallery around eight, and there're plenty of people gathering inside. In my faded brown sweater and black jeans, I'll stick out amongst the men in their tuxedos. My intention isn't to sip on champagne and gallivant with the elite, though. These art posers and their seven figure salaries can't buy taste, though they'll always try. Paintings and sculptures belong to

everyone, yet they don't belong to anyone at the same time. Art is infinitely finite while excluding objectivity. Does that make any sense?

I'm walking in expecting everyone to stop and look at me, but the handsome men and gorgeous women put on the dog without noticing the shabby drunkard. Can I get a bottle of anything but champagne in here? Even if I don't drink amongst the people, I always accept free booze for later.

Desmond and Marilyn conveniently stand talking to one another with their pinkies probably flying as high as their egos. My curmudgeonly joints squish along the hardwood floor as my anger fuels my aging body's slow death. They will know greater pain in their eardrums when I belt my case against contemporary bullshit hanging on the walls.

"August?" Desmond backs away.

"Where is it?" I hiss.

"Please don't," He holds up his hands.

"August Webb?" Marilyn asks. "I taught you when you were a man child."

"Well, Marilyn, I never approved my portrait be hung amongst the demur watercolors and oil splatters these fucking foreskin sucking money whores buy to fuel their cultural cache."

"Oh, shit, people are looking," Desmond says.

"I warned William about your rebel-without-a-clue nature," Marilyn says. "Protest all you like, August. He owns the painting and here it hangs. You know, it's a lot better than what you produced in your twenties."

"You aren't an artist, Marilyn. You're a curator of crap."

"Have a drink with us," She offers.

"And make you look like you're slumming it with a starving artist like me? I wouldn't want to hype your credibility."

"The more eccentric the painter, the more these people want to hang his work in their studies and dining rooms. I'll bet you my supposed credibility that Desmond will be getting a phone call in the morning from one of these people looking to buy your work. I hope every zero and dollar sign burn your soul, August."

If she's right, then the money will hurt. I will never turn down a cent in favor of artistic valor. Squalor and I mix like scotch and vinegar. I tried that one time when I ran out of mixers. Still drank the shit.

Rather than grabbing my painting and bursting the canvas over Desmond's head, I walk out of the gallery and back to the Uber. Never saw a bottle of wine to steal. The community college idea seems more emotionally safe than success. I am so used to the darkness, I forgot the sunlight. I'm a painter; not a poet. My analogies are cheesier than Velveeta.

Ruth

Tracing my hand in the new sketchbook, I bet this is the most fun I'll have in class all semester. In the palm, I draw my eyes with their Hawaiian points which people often mistake as slanted. I have my mother's button nose and dad's distinct lips. Add some black eyebrows, and I have a hand for a head. Maybe this can be my final project and I'll write poetry around the crude drawing? Anything can be art, after all.

That must be Dr. Webb coming in. I expected him to wear a black coat with a turtle neck or a scarf. Maybe a beret. His hair's pretty short and he shaved this morning. There's a red cut on his left cheek. Looking around the auditorium, he takes out a text book from his satchel and drops it on the front podium.

"Why do you do that?" He asks. "Whenever I walk into a classroom, everyone stops talking. You..."

He points at me and I tighten my legs. As he approaches, I close my sketchbook and raise my eyebrows to let him know I'm a good student and will listen to anything he says.

"You stopped drawing."

Aren't I supposed to? I wish I could just draw or write while he's here, but that's disrespectful. Professors kick students out of class for even whispering sometimes.

"This class is not serious. This class is bullshit. It's an easy grade. I'm not a teacher. I'm an artist who has to support himself by appearing as though I am a professor, but I am not. So, I'll ask again: Why did you do that?"

Did he watch *Dead Poets Society* last night? When will he actually teach us? I shouldn't take easy credits like Art History. I'm wasting my parents' money.

"I want to know," He backs away. "Who in here considers themselves an artist? Raise your hands."

I keep my hands in my lap. Does poetry count as art? Probably not to him. With this attitude, he'll rip my notebooks up and use them for kindling. Why do I worry so much about what he thinks, though? He's only a person.

"What's your name?" He points at me. "And why are you in here?"

"Ruth," I say. "I'm an English major, so..."

"Are you a writer?" He interrupts.

"No, I wouldn't say so."

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Ruth?"

"I guess I'm going to teach."

"What were you drawing then?"

I put my sketchbook in my book bag, and I'm ready to walk out and drop this class. Why is he singling me out like this? I don't need this.

"See me after class, please."

Why did I lie? When I chose the English major, I told myself this was the only way I could legitimize my writing to myself, my parents, and the professional world. Yes, I can major in nursing or pre-med while still working on my craft, but I see writers who never studied actual writing outside

of reading good writers, and they're fine. They're rarely great, though. Poetry is not a bestselling author's genre, anyway.

Dr. Webb waits at the front of the class while everyone gathers their books and gets up to leave, and when I try to follow suit, he walks up to my desk. We look at one another in silence before I can't stand the awkwardness and stare at the floor.

"Dr. Webb, I think I'll just go."

"My name is August," He says. "You're free to go if you'd like."

"Did you keep me here just to tell me your name?"

"You seem to not want to be here, so I'm wondering why you'd waste your own time."

"Easy credit?" I say.

"Yes, you've got an A in here already, and it's only the first day. Everyone gets an A, but they have to show up. Believe me, that's a hard credit for some."

"All I have to do is come to class, and I get an A?"

"That's what I said, Ruth."

He walks out of the auditorium, and I'm alone in this big room. Dropping the class at this point seems foolish if all I have to do is show up. Will I have to endure further anxiety as a result, though?

Dr. Webb lets me come and go unencumbered for the next few weeks. I don't stick around to talk to other students because I like getting to my next class early. My History course is across campus and the extra thirty minutes give me time to study. Thus far, Dr. Webb's style is to talk a little and show us a movie or documentary. He insists these convey his meaning better than he can articulate, so he wasn't kidding about showing up for an A. Thus far, we've had no assignments.

As I'm walking to class this afternoon, I don't see anyone waiting in the hall or auditorium. Dr. Webb didn't send us a cancelation email, and there's no note on the door, so I'm guessing we're still having class. It's almost midterm, so a lot of people are either dropping classes or not showing up at all.

"Hey," He walks in.

"Oh," I say. "Hi, Dr. Webb."

"I sent out an email about ten minutes ago, but I guess the department manager didn't put a note out. Class is cancelled today."

"You're here, though," I say.

"Right," He says. "I'm trying to get in the right headspace for an exhibition tonight. I guess you have the next hour and a half free, then?"

"I'll just go to the library and study."

"Ruth," He stops me, "How many friends do you have?"

"Umm," I say. "I'll have to get back to you on that."

"I never see you talking to the other students. It looks like you're drawing during most of class, so I suppose you like to draw?"

"Just doodles. Nothing too serious. I mostly write."

"Well, you're here," Dr. Webb says. "Let's draw."

"What?"

Dr. Webb pulls up a chair to the front table and grabs a notebook from his satchel. Ripping out a sheet of paper, he passes it down to me as I join him. I guess if I don't do this, he'll fail me for the day? His presence makes my doodling seem like chicken scratch, though. I'm not his caliber.

"What do you like to write?" He asks.

"Poetry," I say. "I'm not very good, though."

"No one starts out good, and very few ever become good. It's all about your voice, isn't it? Not the words so much as what you say and who relates to it."

"I never considered that aspect."

He passes me his drawing, and my chest tightens when I see myself on the page. I didn't know he would take this so seriously. I drew a cartoon dog quoting Robert Browning. Though Dr. Webb laughs, I'm cringing at how well he captured me, and his interest in me is a little disturbing. He must be in his mid-thirties, and definitely daddy material, but my teacher none the less.

"I'm going to keep this," Dr. Webb says. "I need to reevaluate everything I know about art now."

"Why are you so interested in me?"

"I'm interested in the souls with depth."

"You mean your girl students with pretty eyes or nice legs?"

"Ouch," He says. "So many implications. Unpack that for me."

"Are there other girls in your class you draw?"

"I have to be honest and admit that you're the first student I took enough interest in to draw."

"Why do I feel like that's just a line?" I ask.

"Because I have nothing to gain from lying. You're smarter than that, Ruth. If I only wanted to get to know you for some sick gratification, I'd already have a reputation."

"And you're willing to risk your reputation to get to know me better?"

"What am I risking? A job where I show movies in a big classroom? This gig pays my rent because my paintings don't pay for shit. Hell, I know that I'm a brilliant artist, but I'm also a terrible artist because no one's buying my work."

"What about Van Gogh?"

"Let's not talk about the one eared man. I'm not that crazy yet."

We sit at the table without speaking until he puts the notebook and my drawing in his satchel and stands. I follow suit and he nods his head before walking out the door. Did I insult him, or is he good humored? Do I really want to worry about that all night and day until our next class when he either acknowledges or ignores me?

Now I'm following him out the door and to the side stairwell where he's gliding down to the ground floor, and my little legs make sharp noises against the tile running after him. When I make it to the door leading outside, Dr. Webb's standing on the steps leading to the quad waiting for me.

"Haven't seen you in a while," He says.

"I don't think you're crazy," I say.

"You should," He says. "Besides, I don't want you thinking I'm crossing any lines."

"Maybe I just want to know why you're into me?"

"Into you?" He smirks.

"Come on. You single me out for some reason."

"You want to know what's really creepy, Ruth? I sent the email that class was cancelled to everyone but you. That's why I'm going to lunch and you can go back to the library and study to your soul's content."

Once again, he's walking away and I'm right behind him. Why am I not creeped out by his gesture? Do I want to live this fantasy of fucking my professor? I'm not a spread-your-legs for daddy kinda whore, am I? Should I really be self-slut shaming right now? It's not like a man of his title and prominence in the art community would want a relationship, right?

"What are you eating?" I ask.

"Whatever five bucks will buy me," He says.

"Let me make you something."

Dr. Webb stops and looks around the quad as if someone might hear. His eyes search mine, and I'm not sure I want to cook for him, but I said it. It's not like I'm letting a professor in a dorm hall since I live in an apartment down the street. I don't have a roommate, and if I do feel like spreading my legs, I can do it where I feel safe and I know where the pepper spray is.

"We might be going too far with this," He says.

"Look, I kinda insulted you, and I would be lying to myself... I can drive us there real quick. I'll make whatever I have."

"If you're comfortable with that," He lowers his voice, "It would be a true pleasure."

"Okay," I nod. "My car's parked across the street."

"Ruth, do me a favor."

"You mean besides cook you lunch?"

"Call me by my name."

"Oh," I say. "Alright, then, August. Let's go."

August

I'm tired of these phone calls. Since William bought another one of my pieces, I get nothing but fucking phone calls. Eventually, I need to actually paint. This new one is a headshot of a man if William and Desmond got their DNA mixed up in a blender. He's balding with curly hair, thick glasses, and a distinctly ugly nose.

Desmond insists this exhibition is going to go over well, but I don't know with who. My creative brain matter spills out of my ear, off my left shoulder, and into the gray water where my brushes soak. I don't want to lose what Ruth and I have, because the lower-middle class mediocrity actually gave me a lot of warmth. True, I am rarely happy, but Ruth provides what little happiness I possess. A lot of money and notoriety can't fill the void I might encounter if my art gets in the way. In a sense, I was better off painting breasts for income.

This is my dream, and I'm turning it into a nightmare. What's Ruth's dream, though? Surely teaching high school English doesn't fulfill her? I haven't read any of her poetry since she graduated, and I don't know if she still writes. She grades papers, cooks our meals, and gives me the attention I crave. Ruth deserves her own voice, and I know that I'm stifling her. That must mean she's really in love with me.

"Do you want me to help with those?" Ruth asks.

"Desmond should be the one helping me."

I carry the two new pieces while Ruth opens the door for me, and Desmond's speed walking past other people to meet us. While he insisted on displaying several pictures, he also wanted me to introduce something new. I suppose he wants me to give a speech or something sappy. Before Ruth, I always had to support myself and my art. My father died when I was fifteen, and my mother couldn't afford my tuition to art school, so I got a job at sixteen. Until I started teaching, I only knew that life. Why'd I give it up for Ruth? In the hopes I'd get to stand in front of people with my art to lean on.

"William already made on offer on these," Desmond says.

"He hasn't seen them," I say.

"Duh. A grand for each. Seem fair?"

"That's more than enough, yes. How much are you taking from all of this?"

"Thirty percent from the door fee. Nothing from your sales, though. That's all you."

"I could give it all away for free. As long as they like the art."

All my lovers ended up pulling away or neglecting me. I spent all my time trying to please them and show them how I feel, but they eventually grow tired of it. In the beginning, I thought Ruth would leave me and get bored with the little drawings I passed to her or the portraits with her face building up in my closet. In this room, she stands next to me, yet she surrounds all of the people I'd never trust.

William slaps my shoulder and gives Ruth a hug. Why the hell is he doing all of this? Does he really need an excuse to spend money? Do I look like such a bum he wants to help me like a man on the street with a Styrofoam cup full of pennies?

"Aren't you pleased, August?" William asks. "You get to be alive to see your art go places."

"I'm sure the hype will die soon," I say. "I expect disappointment."

"A lot of my friends are here because they want to know who painted the new pieces in my home. My wife hung the first one I bought in our bedroom."

I'm not sure what to say. This gathering isn't a joke. These people want to honor me, and I almost hope they forget me tomorrow. Ruth can't stop smiling, and Desmond's pulling me to the center where they all turn to me as he pulls the sheets off the new portraits. They're both of Ruth.

"Ladies and gentle fellows," Desmond says, "This is my friend, August Webb. A lot of you are just now hearing about him, but I knew about him in his days as a professor. The woman you see in a lot of these paintings is his wife, Ruth, and the reason he gave up teaching for his real passion. The difference between him and every artist I hang in this gallery is simple yet so utterly complex. He loves his wife as much as he loves the brushes that stain the canvas."

Clapping makes me wince. I didn't need that introduction, but Desmond knows I'm nothing without Ruth. She's the inspiration and most interesting part of me. What do I owe this world that I will never be able to pay back thanks to her?

"I appreciate the turn out," I say. "Desmond knows I don't like meeting with buyers, but most of the people who bought my work from him wanted tastefully explicit material. This room makes me seem obsessive, and I admit that much. You're all smart enough to realize I'm not like you. Instead of insulting you, I know I can't pick my audience, so I accept you if you accept me."

"Yes," William chimes in. "We accept you, August."

In twenty minutes, the room's cleared out. People got their paintings and left. William refills my glass as Ruth nestles against my shoulder. Having a rich man pour my wine humbles me more than I'd thought. He's not a bad man, so why not enjoy his generosity? I'm not the best at taking from others when I had to work to get what I wanted.

Ruth cooked me a Greek dish with potatoes, onions, and olive oil, which confused me about her heritage. I knew cancelling class just to see her alone was going to get me fired, though it didn't. She sliced French bread into little scoops we used to soak up the oil. When I started teaching, I always ate take out. Having someone cook a dish I didn't order and share it with me was so foreign.

"You chose English because you're a writer?" I asked.

"I thought it would make me better," She shrugged. "Alas, I'm still pretty shitty."

"Read me something," I said. "That picture you drew wasn't endearing."

"I don't want you to leave before you finish your lunch, though."

"If you read me one poem, I'll buy you dinner."

She smiled like when I stood in front of the gallery crowd. Turning to her bookshelf, Ruth returned to the table with a thick notebook that might kill a small animal if she dropped it. After flipping through a few pages, her eyes danced while she bit her lip and tried to keep her humble wits.

"I give you space," She started, "Wait until you're done. Push with words, when I chase, you run. If it's you you're looking for and you want to be alone, I hope you return when I'm done. You're free to be away. You're free to set me aflame. If it's you you're looking for, you put the fear in me. Don't you need a shadow? When I cry on the phone, you tell me I'm wrong to fight for you. I'm wrong, but it's right for you. Because I scream to the songs you used to play. I hated them until you went away."

Even now, I don't know if it was a good poem. She could read about the tooth fairy stealing children's hemorrhoids, and I'd probably like it. Still, I wanted to give her the truth, and I realized this was the part of her soul I wanted to find. Ruth would not stand up and read that in class. This was more intimate than I thought I'd ever know her.

"Who'd you write that for?" I asked.

"Me," She said. "It's about how I want to find myself, and sometimes people have to let themselves go in order to figure out what that means."

We're holding hands walking down the sidewalk to a diner. My wallet's full of checks, and it's usually only there to hold my ID and maxed out Capitol One card. Did I tell her that I liked the poem? Obviously, whatever I said didn't hurt her pride enough because we're married.

I toss her the wallet in the booth, and Ruth takes out our future to count. I don't remember where I took her to eat back then. Probably a diner like this. Well, not many diners have beer on tap. Desmond slipped me a ten dollar bill on the way out for a cold one. Last time he bought me a drink, I had short hair.

"We should invest this," I say. "I want you to use this."

"For what?"

"Why don't you finally get your masters? When the money dries up, you'll be able to support my art addiction better."

"More like your alcohol problem," She pokes me.

"I'll stop drinking if you get in to a grad program."

"I don't know. Teaching wasn't really my intent."

"So, get your MFA. Or we could put this into publishing a book."

"A book nobody will buy."

"I'll paint the cover."

"Sorry, but I won't let you waste this money, August."

We don't need the money for bills or food. I want Ruth to find something better for herself. My weight as a partner must flatten her at times, though she always smiles at me. I never see her cry. She's my reason to breathe, yet I worry I'll suffocate her ambition.

Ruth's gone to work when I put a new canvas on my easel. This time, I want to paint without direction. No sketching or outline. I haven't dipped my brush in a color while closing my eyes in years. When the horse hairs smear on the cloth, I see crimson. Letting the excess drop like blood, I take another brush and choose a dark blue.

Some paintings should never hang on a wall. They're diary entries that I lock away or burn. Souls build up toxins, and every person has to expel their demons. I choose misdirection and hope that whatever I end up with makes a work of art.

There's a knock at the door, so I dab a little more red and fling a spark at the image before walking out to the living room and looking out the window. Desmond and William are here. Why can't I escape the commerce chasing my art?

"Gentlemen," I let them in.

"Here's a copy of the Times," Desmond says. "Sit down to read it."

"You want me to read the newspaper?"

"I invited a friend who writes for New York Times," William sits down. "Jon Irving."

"Uh huh," I say.

Under a picture of one of my paintings, there's a paragraph no longer than my pinky. Typically, Mr. Irving thinks my work needs direction and focuses too much on my wife. He mentions seeing one of my other pieces, the large breasted woman bending over for a paper fan, and finding it similarly distasteful. I'm not certain this pisses me off, but I bet this guy loves a landscape and field of daisies.

"I've heard worse," I say. "Why'd you invite this guy to give me a bad review?"

"August," Desmond says, "Do you know what William does? Like his job?"

"Uber driver?" I ask.

"He owns the Times."

"Do you think I was just tagging along with Desmond when we first met?" William asks. "I went to one of your exhibitions fifteen years ago when you were still teaching. You had a painting of a girl with a bowl cut."

"That was the first one I ever painted of Ruth."

"I bought it back then. It's been hanging in my office for fifteen years."

I don't get this guy. He wants me to peel him like a rotten onion. At no point did he hint he owned the Times, and I didn't even know one person could own a newspaper. Surely a corporation does? Does he own said corporation too?

"I had Irving review you on purpose," William says. "He's an old codger who thinks Dali is still misunderstood and anything after 1973 is shit. I have a younger writer on staff who's a bit more hip, and he guaranteed me good copy."

"What are you gaining from this?" I ask. "Have you been holding on to that painting all these years hoping to find me in the slums somewhere so you could make a name for yourself?"

"My wife is the one who put in the original bid on that painting you hated. I withdrew her bid and paid you for both paintings. When I heard her say your name, I called Desmond because I wanted to meet you. I wasn't expecting to buy the painting of Ruth too."

"Why am I even here?" Desmond asks. "August, accept William's generosity. He likes your work."

No man is generous nor selfless. William's motives will surface like bloated bodies rising from the ocean. He could give me a million dollars and I wouldn't trust him. My art should speak alone without his bullhorn. Who hires a journalist to give me a bad review and then turn around with another journalist for a good one? That's a game I didn't want to play, yet he's cast me between the pawns and rooks.

"Would you like to show us what you're working on?" William asks.

"Just started. It's a personal piece," I say. "There's no sketch or direction. The paint's guiding me."

"I won't make on offer on it unless you want, but I'd really like to see it when you're finished."

"Why let you see my soul when you've already bought chunks of it?"

"You know," Desmond says, "August will probably let you have it when he's through. Ruth's smelled burning paint coming from the fireplace because he likes to burn the ones no one else should see."

"No one will have it," I say. "Did you gentlemen have anything else to share with me?"

"What're you having for lunch?" William asks. "Let's get something."

"The paint fumes don't work as well if I'm full."

When the Devil and his minion leave, I return to the studio and press my hand in a Pepto Bismol pink shade. Folding my fingers, I imprint myself into the cloth. This is my focal point, and from here I will craft. Other shades crowd around the pink like the voices barging in on my life.

Ruth

Dr. Robertson looks at my proposed schedule and makes a few clicks on he desktop computer. August suggested I take more creative writing classes, but my teaching degree doesn't require anymore electives. Next Spring, I will be in two English courses and two teaching seminars unless Dr. Robertson suggests otherwise.

"By the way," He looks up, "How is your art course with Dr. Webb this semester? I hear things about him."

Is he about to tell me about a reputation August has with female students and how he uses sex to grant them better grades? Maybe he's a drug user and I haven't seen the tract marks yet? Granted, I haven't seen August naked or even shirtless. Despite his eccentric interest in me, he hasn't made any moves. We haven't kissed or held hands either. Though he's taken me to dinner and I cook for him, our relationship appears platonic on the outside. Good thing no one reads my poetry.

"Dr. Webb is great," I nod. "I haven't heard any complaints."

"Well, you're in his introductory course. A lot of people take it for an easy credit. His 3000 and 4000 level courses are a bit more rigorous to my understanding."

"Is he mean or something?"

"I met him a few times and I've never heard anyone call him unkind, but he's difficult. The department chair doesn't think he grades fairly, apparently. Gives out too many A's and not enough F's. So much of what we do is based on graphs and formulas. Still, as long as he's able to prove how he grades his students, it's non-issue."

"I thought you were going to tell me he hangs students upside down or something."

"Nothing like that, but he was out for a semester last year when his mother passed."

August doesn't talk about his parents or past. While I might have an anecdote about a guy I dated for a few weeks, he must have a book's worth of lovers and burdens. I did go to his exhibition after we first ate dinner, and there was one portrait of a middle-aged woman looking out the window. The ground was red and the sky was green. If you put longer hair on August, that would've been him in the gray paint.

"You're progressing well, Ruth," Dr. Robertson says. "Looks like a good selection you have here, and at this point I'm only here to approve your courses. Some students make it a little harder on me."

"I have my quirks," I say, "But thank you."

Sometimes I look down at my notebook when I want to write, and nothing comes out, so I'm staring at a blank sheet forever. Life feels like a poem I keep trying to write but keep erasing words and marking out phrases. The only definite in my career is teaching. Writing is supposedly my hobby, but it's my true passion. I'm not good enough for publication.

Poetry has formula even in free verse. Each writer follows a pattern subconsciously that guides them from beginning to end. Early poets overuse multisyllabic words and their subject matter revolves around objects like flowers or overtly universal themes like sex and love. We all want to write a love poem, but the best are the ones when we suffer. An ideal love is free from pain, yet that's not reality. Passion leads to suffering and pleasure.

After my classes end, my expectation is to go study, eat, bathe, and sleep. This cycle promotes character and growth into adulthood. While other students are finding themselves through trial and error with drinking, parties, and sex, I am a dork feeling around for a match in this darkness we're fumbling through. Really, I'm not better than my peers. I often feel like I'm less.

August walks into my apartment with his satchel and a canvas bag. I don't know what to say since I wasn't expecting him for anything besides my lasagna and some TV. He doesn't really stay long after we eat, though.

Setting up an easel and using my table for his paints and brushes, August points at the chair across from him, so I sit down and check my timer to make sure dinner's about done. He chooses a greenish teal water color and paints the canvas as if deciding on what he wants the kitchen to look like.

"Are you going to paint me?" I ask.

"I want to get the background first," He says. "Sometimes I do a base and paint over it."

"Do you need to sketch me?"

"I've sketched you enough. I want to paint you now."

Perhaps this is the most intimate we'll ever become? I thought he was lecherous at first, and now I'm over waiting. I'm twenty, but I'm an adult and I know that I want him. Even if we're only briefly lovers, as cheesy and overtly poetic as that sounds, I need to feel August. Boys are okay. I want to experience a man. Scratch through his chest hairs, trace his scars, and look closely at the wrinkles around his eyes.

"Can you take a break for dinner?" I ask.

"When you're ready, sure. As soon as we're done, I'm doing this."

I'm wearing a t-shirt and a mismatched orange skirt, because picking an outfit requires effort. When I take the pasta out of the oven, I excuse myself to the bedroom. In my closet, there's a men's button up shirt I bought from Old Navy on clearance and I have a pair of shorts that cut off an inch before my knee. While not provocative, if I take my bra off, I might pass as sexy in a morning-after kinda way.

"I went to my advisor today," I say. "He asked about you."

"Hmm," August's mouth is full.

"I was a little let down by your lack of reputation."

"Who's your advisor?"

"Dr. Robertson."

"Don't know him. If you want scoop on me, ask someone in the art department."

"That's the thing, August. I don't really know much about you. You never talk about yourself. We always talk about me and art."

"You're more intriguing than me. I'm only a painter. My personality is external."

"So humble," I say. "But you're pretty high energy in class."

"What is there to really know about me? I'm thirty-six and my parents are dead. Never been married. Other than painting, I don't do much socially. My world is based on subjectivity and the real world is objective."

"Wow. Typical August. You say so much and it means nothing at all."

I kick his ankle under the table to let him know I'm joking. He's too involved with the lasagna to care. Every time I watch him eat is like seeing porn of a man masturbating with a soap opera camera effect.

"I'm interested in you," He says, "Because I want to know if you're right for me."

"Oh. So this is some sort of relationship?"

"You're my student, so I'm not supposed to act on these feelings, Ruth. My last relationship was two years ago. I can't fall for you until I know you're ready for all of this, because loving me is like riding a bull through a hail storm."

"It doesn't hurt that I'm young and impressionable."

He wants to mold me, and I want him to put his hands on me to do it. I'm probably just horny because I haven't fucked in a while. When he puts his fork on the plate and scoots them over to me, I lean behind me to put them in the sink, and August's dipping his brush and outlining me on the canvas.

"I'm not even done eating," I say.

"It's not about capturing the perfect picture," He says. "It's the real thing I want."

After I put my plate in the sink, I move the chair around so he can see the rest of me. Crossing my legs, I move my ankle in circles and wiggle my toes so he'll look below my waist, but August looks through my face and keeps painting.

"How long will this take?" I ask.

"Maybe an hour," He says. "I'll finish it up at home."

"Why not take your time here?"

"I told you my father died when I was a teenager," He says. "I had an uncle, my mom's brother Jack, who figured I needed guidance. See, mom didn't care if I majored in art. Jack said he'd help out if I went into the military so I could have that as a foundation."

"You were in the service?"

"For three years," August says. "I was in the Army, so at least I have some shitty insurance for the rest of my life and a check every month. Honestly, it's the most impressive thing on my resume."

"You never bring it up in class."

"It's not worth talking about, really. You go through training, get hazed for a while, get to shoot a gun, sit around a lot, and get some structure in your routine."

"You ever have to shoot at anybody?"

"For your reference," August says, "Don't ever ask someone that. But no, I never had to shoot at a person. Just target practice."

"What'd your uncle do after you got out of the Army?"

"Oh, Jack died my second year in. He left me enough money to pay for school, and the government reimbursed me. If not for that money, I wouldn't have my house."

I uncross my legs to get more comfortable because the conversation's getting a little depressing. My parents still take care of me financially, and I never had to get a job. The prospect of even entering a military base frightens me, so I can't complain about my life compared to August. My emotions are real, though. My poetry is my filter.

Rather than prolong the intrusion into August's past, I look at how he's so focused and daydream about where this might end. Do I only want a fling with my professor like a notch on my bedpost? I really want to know this person.

"Are my legs distracting you?" I ask.

Jesus, I sound desperate. I'm a young, pretty girl with tan skin, long legs, and a thin figure. Yeah, guys my age are surrounded by a lot of girls, but shouldn't an older man want to pounce me?

"The way you keep moving distracts me," August says. "I'm focused on your face."

This must be a game. He's holding a good set of cards, but I can win the whole pot if I unbutton my shirt. Starting with the top button, August furrows his brow when I get the second. Biting my lip, I move to the third.

"You know it's almost thirty degrees outside," He says.

"Can't you finish your painting later?"

I stand up and pull off my shirt. While this isn't an erotic tale of seduction and intrigue, I want to be in control. I don't care if we get it over with in fifteen seconds. There doesn't have to be any foreplay or sexy talk. August needs to want me like I want him, and his restraint pisses me off.

"I could lose my tenure over this," August says.

"I won't tell."

"Even if we end up hating each other?"

"Why would we do that?"

"Because relationships end in two ways: hatred or death."

"Then I choose death."

Rolling his eyes, August slips his hands behind my back and looks up at me from the chair. Since he's not making a move, I sit down on his leg and grab his face so he can't pull away from a kiss.

"You're all I can think about," I say.

"That's why I came over," He says. "I haven't painted anything since I met you."

August

Frederick Scott still has the handlebar mustache modeled after some Spaghetti Western hero he saw as a boy. His ringtone is the whistling from a Clint Eastwood movie. He's rubbing that thing on his face while looking at the article Stanley Beasley wrote about me in the Times. I regret coming in for an interview because I remember how I couldn't stand him before.

A lot of people think I was fired and lost tenure. While I did start dating a student, I married her after she graduated and no other women came forward with stories of how I hit on them. Before Ruth, I never entertained the idea of being with a younger woman because people that age aren't as mature. They're generally stuck up their own ass. I guess I am too.

I never denied being fired, though. A bad reputation enhances the art. Nobody likes good boy painters. Still, Frederick was my colleague at the time I resigned and remembers my dalliance with Ruth. His art possessed such little personality, I could train a ten-year-old to do what he does. Now he's the chair of the department and resident in-house artist.

"This is all a little formal for someone who had tenure and didn't renew their contract. I mean, you didn't have to show me this review, August. None of us have ever received both a good and bad review in the Times during the same week."

"I thought my reputation might cause me to be unwelcomed," I say.

"Your reputation? More like a legacy. You married a young woman and stopped teaching to paint fulltime. None of us held that against you."

"Yet here I am."

"That's what I don't get," He says. "You suddenly have the success we all want, and I'm supposed to hire you to teach again?"

"I'd rather be making money legitimately than being someone's whore. Almost every new piece I paint, someone's buying before the canvas is dry. It's usually William Pollock."

Frederick's face contorts in confusion before he shakes his head and pulls out some papers from his desk. I recognize them from when I was first hired. Back then, none of us had laptops in our offices, and we couldn't check emails from our cell phones. The university still uses the same contracts, though.

"Before I let you sign this," Frederick says, "Obviously you know I can't let you start until May because we've already posted the course catalog for Spring. The board has to approve you, but I doubt anyone will say No."

"That's fine," I say. "Thanks, Frederick."

"But, I can get you a stipend for the semester on a research basis."

"Research?" I ask.

"Yeah, you know those things we call essays? Just do some research for it. Go to the library, get on a computer, or whatever. The university press will put it out."

"Alright then," I say. "How much is the stipend?"

"I can approve only two grand since you're not full time yet."

"That'll be fine. When can I get the check?"

"August, we don't cut checks anymore. Email me your bank info and we'll deposit it."

"I haven't had a bank account since I left. I'll send you Ruth's stuff."

"That works too. Just have an essay done in four months."

"And you'll let me know about the teaching position?"

"I'll call you."

When I walk outside, I sit on the steps of the humanities building and look out at the quad. I might fit in if I shave my beard down to a goatee and put gel in my hair. Then I'd look like a douchebag, but people like douchebags. There are several walking around out here. The girls have nice style in their tight jeans and wool sweaters, but I'm a biased, horny old man. None of them make me want to clean their assholes with my tongue like Ruth.

Our relationship somehow hasn't ended with her feeling I'm too clingy or emotionally unstable. Two years before Ruth, a woman aptly named Lydia dumped me. A few months before her was Carol. I met Carol a year before Lydia left me. Not unlike Lydia, Carol took someone else's place, and I can't remember her name, but it only lasted a month. My brain cannot handle idle flings. I need a full emotional investment, yet by the time I got to Lydia, my interest was self-preservation and escaping the breakdown of a relationship's end.

The best way to mend a broken heart is to find a new love, and Lydia was a Band-Aid on a slit wrist. I mean a down-the-road-to-the-morgue slit wrist. Carol left me two weeks before Lydia and I met, so my life was showing up to classes to teach, drinking until I felt better, and painting until I passed out. When I woke up, I had to shower and scrape paint off my face because I often slept on a wet brush on with my head against a canvas.

It's not like Lydia was the great love of my life, and neither was Carol. Most of my memories with them are similar. I drank, coddled them, spent a lot of my money on them, and broke down any time they needed space. That's why I took two years to myself before Ruth. Breaking a cycle means not falling into a new one.

Why did I choose Ruth? She was a student, and that was unethical. In my memory, I never hit on a student before her. The first thing I noticed were her eyes when she looked up from her sketchbook. Dark brown eyes are an ingredient in a person. I can't say every woman with any color eye floors me, but they help. Combined with her unsure lip biting and short hair, she had my attention. I didn't decide I would prey on her the first time I saw her, but she left an imprint. When I kept seeing her in class, I needed to be with her alone to see how I actually felt.

After Ruth started taking other classes, we still weren't officially together. For a couple that didn't place a label on their relationship, she started coming to my house almost every day. I sat on the floor drawing her while Fleetwood Mac's "Storms" played on the turntable, and she ate strawberries I diced up for her. It's normal for new couples to have sex a lot, but how often do they continue on for months? After almost two decades of marriage, I don't know how we keep at it. I knew it was an unhealthy dependency back then, because if I lost her, I'd drink myself to death.

Ruth

Slurping up the last of his ramen, August puts down the soup bowl and leans against the couch. He likes sitting on the floor when we watch TV. Probably because my couch is only big enough for two people, and I know he feels guilty for us sleeping together. That hasn't stopped him from coming over and me initiating sex again.

"I haven't ever had ramen that wasn't microwaved," He says.

"You can thank my mom for teaching me to cook," I say. "One day."

Now that he's fed, I might take my clothes off and lay on the floor next to him. Just to see what happens. Someone knocks at the door. I don't think the TV is too loud, and I'm not expecting anyone. August looks around as he turns the volume down.

My dad holds a brown grocery bag and reaches to pinch my cheek, which must be flushed. If he looks around and sees August, I don't know what to tell him. There's no rule against having boys over at my place, but that's never been an issue until now. I wonder if there's an unspoken rule about men or college professors?

Dad goes by Gregory, but his birth name is Akamu. He moved from Hawaii to Buffalo in the seventies and met Jenni, my mom. They opened a Hawaiian restaurant in NYC, and now own a small chain, which is how I get to live in my own apartment without having a job. I thread lightly around them with my behavior for this reason.

"Ruth," He hugs me.

"Dad."

"Oh," He looks around me.

August doesn't linger around or hide. My thumping pulse stops when August grabs Dad's hand in a firm shake and introduces himself. Luckily, he's smart enough not to say he taught my art class last semester. While August shows little emotion to strangers and often loses volume in his voice as he speaks in public, he's more like the day I first saw him in class when he called me out in front of everyone.

"Apologies for meeting this way," August says. "Ruth had me over for dinner because I can't cook worth a damn."

"How hospitable," Dad says. "Ruth is the sweetest soul I know. Would you excuse us for the evening? I have to speak to my daughter for a while."

"It was a true pleasure to meet you, sir."

August grabs his coat from the kitchen table and winks at me as he's out the door. Dad's smile fades as he puts the bag on my counter and folds his hands into his pockets. I'm about to hear something I don't want to hear, and I wish August hadn't left. He's my shield.

"I brought you some stuff from the store," He says. "Just some cutlets and rice. I haven't seen as many charges on your account the past few months, so I figured you were feeling guilty about us paying for everything. Is he buying your food now?"

"Since I cook for him all the time, August insists," I say.

"What's the arrangement here, Ruth? You don't need money. Is he paying you for sex?"

"He doesn't pay me anything. We're together."

Dad exhales and slaps the counter behind him. I didn't know me seeing a man would be an issue, but apparently he doesn't approve of August. Why wouldn't he? August has a house, he was in the military, teaches college courses, has a PhD, and a small following in the art world. He's not a rich man, but he takes care of himself, and we've been taking care of each other since we started going out.

"I'm over this, Ruth," He says. "You chose to major in writing or whatever you want to call it, and I figured you'd get two years in and change your mind. We're not supporting you just to support you. We want you to stand on your own feet and become an adult."

"What does this have to do with August?" I ask.

"You're using this apartment to fuck some man who was probably old enough to have a job when you were born. If you're mature enough for a man, then you don't need our money anymore."

"So, you want me to leave him?"

"If you want to keep living here, yes. But I can't control you."

"You kinda are if you're blackmailing me to leave my boyfriend."

"And if you're such a mature adult, you will."

"No," I say. "I don't have to do that."

Sure, I'm standing up to my Dad who hasn't ever made such demands before. He thinks he's protecting me, and that's fine. He probably thinks August is using me for sex or manipulating me because he can't date women his own age. I don't know if August wants me to live with him, but I'm not living here anymore.

"You can take your cutlets and rice and shove them up your ass, Dad. I'm moving out tonight."

"Ruth," He says. "Please reconsider speaking to me this way. I can't forgive you for that. I..."

"Dad, I need you to leave. I have to pack."

Grabbing the grocery bag, Dad goes to the door and I shut it behind him. Hopefully, August will call me when he gets home so I can fill him in. I was never fond of living by myself, and I hate being without August anyway. If I can finagle my way into moving into his house, I won't have either problem.

Dad's not a bad parent, but he's selfish. When Mom finds out, she may talk him into apologizing to me. They'll fight, but she'll win. I don't want that on my shoulders weighing me down, though. He was right about me seeing an older man. I can't be a girl when I need to be a woman. If August lets me this far into his life, I'll always owe him.

In less than a minute, my relationship with Dad died. Before this moment, we never fought about boys, school, or money. He never says why he's so liberal with me, but it must be that he thinks I'll grow out of it.

Another knock. Must be Dad trying to come back for round two. Instead, August stands before me. My goddamn hero. Yeah, I know it's not the most feminist thing to have a man save you, but he's my friend too. Doesn't matter that he's a man when I need someone.

"I was in the emergency stairwell. I heard some yelling."

"You never left," I say.

"Nope."

"Well, did you hear the part where I have to move out?"

"You know, that's perfect timing, because I just moved my harem into a separate place."

"You're sure?"

August takes my hand and bites my finger before combing his fingertips through my hair. I don't need any more confirmation. When I move aside to let him in, he walks over to my bookshelf and starts pulling the volumes down into a pile on the kitchen table. I go into the bedroom and pull both of my suitcases from under my bed and start emptying my underwear and sock drawer.

In thirty minutes, we have all of my important possessions, including what little food I had in the fridge, in the back of August's Volkswagen Golf. Another ten minutes, and we're at his place. This is when I realize this is now my home. I'm not with my parents, and I don't have my own apartment.

August's house is basic. He has a studio for his painting in one room, a bedroom, one bathroom, a kitchen with a dining room table big enough for four people, and a living room with a brown sofa, a beat up coffee table, a bunch of vinyl records, and a twenty-inch TV. What can I do to feel at home other than being with him?

Eventually, his colleagues may find out his former student and girlfriend is living in his house, and that might get him fired. Hell, it will probably get him blacklisted or shunned from the local art community. Then again, he despises most of his peers. We're both shooting ourselves in the foot, so we can lean on each other to get by.

I can make us both feel better by laying out on his bed and let him do anything to me. He's still timid about that, though. Does he second guess us every time we fuck? Maybe it's like another bullet in his shield that will eventually break.

"August," I say. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

"Don't be insecure with me," He says. "I'm insecure enough."

"What for?"

"Because I'm in love with you, and the problem is that this feeling is chasing me. Every day, it's stronger, and I can't stop thinking about you. When I'm in class, when I paint, when I do anything. You're all I think about. Every woman I'm with, I chase away with how instable I am. All I draw and paint are images of you. It's an unhealthy obsession, and it's going to scare you one day."

Actually, that amount of passion turns me on. My vagina's tingling like I just downed a pitcher of mimosas. When I lean into him, my legs want to turn to boiled noodles. He doesn't know how much I write when he's not around. Each poem is a new take on how I feel for August, and our sick love will collide into one another and make a beautifully tragic collage.

"Love me as much as you want," I say. "I want to be yours."

"I want to take care of you, Ruth," He says. "I'll make sure you finish school and get hired wherever you want."

"Then I'll take care of you. It's only fair."

August

William opens his front door for me and we exchange our greetings while I wonder why the hell I'm here. I finished this esoteric piece with my pink handprint in the middle, and I hope he hates it and finally questions my artistic ability. For a man who owns everything, his house isn't the biggest I ever saw, though I could fit my house in his living room. Why do rich people like white and brown so much? The furniture is brown leather and every shelf is a golden brown with pictures framed in brown stained wood. I miss the seventies when people put color in things no matter how gaudy it looked.

I never turn down a drink, and William's not emptying bottles of Canadian Mist like me. He pours me a Maker's Mark from a bottle the shape of a tear drop and my toes curl when I smell it. Everything he says is a muffled mumble compared to the flavor tongue fucking me. I'm not even embarrassed when I set down the empty glass, because William reaches over and pours me another.

"Damn, you can drink," He says.

"I need it for the reaction you're going to have," I start unzipping the canvas.

"Maybe I should polish mine off too."

While it doesn't look like a Jackson Pollock, the painting reminds me of landscape with no discernable ground or sky. All of the colors spring from the pink, which loudly assaults our eyes as if we're not worthy to see underneath.

"Is it even worth the price tag?" I ask.

"You said you were letting me have it for nothing," William says. "I'd say you're a fool."

"Come on. How deluded are you?"

"What? There's nothing wrong with it. It would look better on my mantle than that Monet print."

I drain the second glass. He's prodding me along and I don't believe his sincerity. That painting isn't worth my toenail clippings. If he wants to put it above the fireplace, that's his delusion to follow.

"You want the bottle?" William offers. "Seems like I'm ripping you off."

"I accept all payments of whiskey," I say.

"Say, were you sober when you did this?"

"Some of it, yeah."

"You drink every night?"

"Some nights I don't. Does that affect my artistic integrity?"

"No, but it worries me about your liver."

Who the fuck is William to tell me I should cut out drinking? Ruth never did. All she ever asks is if she can pour me another. Fucker offers me a bottle and asks if I have a problem or something. I won't say I can quit, but I have no intention of quitting.

"I'm not trying to piss you off," He says. "You're not abusive or too abrasive, but you might pickle your liver. Ruth will be a widow, and all of your paintings will be worth double if not triple what they are now. I have a lot to gain from you dying, but I don't want that."

"Dying?" I ask.

"I'll give you five hundred dollars right now if you've been to the doctor in the last five years for a checkup."

"I only see a doctor when I'm sick," I say. "I haven't been for a checkup since I quit teaching."

"Are you going to pitch a fit if I send a doctor over to see you tomorrow?"

Just for that comment, I want to piss on his rug. He might keep the thing and sell it, though. I recognize the necessity in seeing a doctor regularly, but the last time I saw one, Dr. Wade told me to quit drinking and stop eating so many cheeseburgers. I'm an artist, and I want to die the way I want. Not from cancer or a heart attack. I'll let the alcohol poison me one day.

"You are overstepping a boundary, William."

"Fine. I won't bother you about anything but art, August."

Accepting the bottle from William, I walk out with him and go back to the car he sent to pick me up. My attitude is going to scare him away and I'll be back to painting nudes soon enough. Maybe my return to teaching brings me the balance of income and artistic freedom I needed.

By the time I'm back at my place, I'm halfway through the Maker's Mark and feeling a good buzz. Ruth's going to find me passed out on the floor if I don't stop, but each sip invites more thirst. With my latest painting gone, I don't know what to do.

Back in my twenties, I wasn't much of a drinker. My greatest fear as an undergrad was falling into a cliché, and getting drunk regularly felt too obvious. I took my coursework seriously and went through all the exercises and history classes they forced on us. Even in my graduate work, I stayed sober.

Things change in a doctorate program, though. How do I contribute to the art academic community and intelligentsia with only paint? A lot of nights spent with a heavy coat on in the library while the snow clung to the windows. Alcohol keeps you warm. Staves off loneliness and headaches. I forgot a lot of what I wrote back then, but my paintings still hang on walls from that period.

Why try to justify William's point? He gave me this bottle, and it's good. I'm an adult. Another drink won't mean any difference from the last.

A knock rouses me from the whiskey twilight. That's not Ruth silhouetting at the kitchen door. Whoever they are, I hope they like my bad breath. He's got small eyes and wrinkles that outline his expression as they curve downward. I only recognize him from the night Ruth moved in, and that was over twenty years ago. For a man who seemed bigger than the room, he's shorter than me but aged better.

"Afternoon," He says. "August?"

"Yes," I say.

"Gregory. I was hoping to speak to you, but I also wanted to see Ruth."

"She'll be here in a minute. School should be out soon."

I open the door and gesture toward the kitchen table, because he can either join me in finishing the bottle or watch me. His presence sobers me up too much. Gregory and Jenni didn't come to the courthouse when I married Ruth, and I worried she would miss her parents for the first few years. Then they never came up and I forgot she had parents.

Gregory must be nearly eighty-years-old, and I'm not ignorant about why a man suddenly overcomes his pride and wants to make amends. He doesn't look sick, but that doesn't mean he won't die soon. His presence might remind Ruth that she chose me over her family, though.

"I don't drink," Gregory says. "Don't let me stop you, though."

"You wanted to speak to me," I say.

"Right. It's an unfortunate thing, really. Ruth didn't keep any line of communication open to us. I found you through your dealer."

"Desmond?"

"Yes. He had me buy some painting, though not one of yours. I already have one of your pieces."

"Why would you buy one of my paintings?"

"This was before my daughter left us. Before my wife left me."

"You got a divorce?"

"Jenni past five years after. I chose not to publicize it. Her ashes remain in our home, though."

"My condolences, sir," I say.

Ruth's not going to take any pleasure in that discovery. If this doesn't send her on a spiral, then I'll quit drinking. Given the gravity of this news, I wager this bottle alone won't suffice.

"I didn't mean for all of this," I try to explain, "To happen the way it did."

"You weren't in the wrong, August. I was. If I was right, you wouldn't still be married."

I finish another glass and we sit. Ruth's car pulls up outside and I expect her to walk in and walk back out. Gregory remains at the table, but I'm standing hoping she won't run away. I really need her. The only reason I drink when she's not around is to dull the pain of her absence.

She stands near the table as if waiting for Gregory to start talking. Instead, he looks at her with watering eyes and a smile he tries to hide. Ruth sits next to me and grabs my glass before pouring a drink. After a couple of sips, she sighs and they look at each other.

"I can go work in the other room," I say.

"No," Gregory says. "You're part of her. I have accepted that for a long time."

"Thank you," Ruth says.

"I spent a lot of time missing you, Ruth. Seeing you again makes me realize that I don't know you anymore. I was mourning the death of our relationship, I suppose."

"You're still my father."

"I suppose."

A regret in our relationship is never divulging much of my past. I don't remember much about my father, and I tried my best to forget my mother. The alcohol helped with memory loss. Of course, I don't consider the past all that interesting. I'm paranoid about the future, after all. Will my business relationship with William pan out into something more for my art? If I go back to teaching, I won't have the same time or mental energy to paint as I did.

Ruth

I check my PO Box every other day for acceptance or rejection letters. August helps with submission fees, which are generally only a few bucks. Every time he buys me anything, I feel guilty. The poems I mail out are investments, though. There's a possibility more than just five people will know my name one day, and they'll think I'm a beautiful soul with my tortured phrases.

Today, I unlock the gray door to find an empty box. Silence sometimes feels worse than rejection, though rejection kills hope. I envy August because he actually makes money from his paintings, even if he can only take us out to dinner when he sells a painting. People know who he is, and that's worth more than a night out.

I write for myself, so I never consider an audience. That's probably the issue. Who wants to read what's essentially a fancy formatted diary entry? Most critics don't know what's good until the writer achieves fame, and often after they die. People get too caught up in what they deem worthwhile to look at a work of art without their smudged lens. I want to see what the artist intends.

Lately, my poems are all about August, so I probably appeal to young girls who fantasize about older men. Nothing I compose is graphic or overtly sexual, but longing is powerful. August can't seem to stop painting me, but I don't let him read my work. After I edit and write a copy for my notebook, I type up the final draft and stick it in an envelope.

As I'm walking out the post office, I see my mom. She's carrying a package, though I don't know who she would send a package to. I expect her to see me and scold me with her eyes, but instead, she exclaims my name and hugs me tight to her chest and kisses my cheek over and over.

"Your dad was just being an asshole," She says. "I'm so sorry, sweetie."

"Hey, Mom," I say.

"How are you? Let me take you out for lunch. Please, let me. I just need to mail this and we can go wherever you want."

"Umm. I'd like that."

While I wouldn't mind raking Mom's wallet over a steak filet, I opt for the Burger King nearby. She doesn't object, but I bet she's relieved I didn't pick something downtown. When we sit down in our booth, Mom doesn't unwrap her chicken sandwich. She watches me dipping a fry in ketchup and chewing as if I'm a new species of female.

"You really didn't have to move out of your place," She says. "Your dad had to pay out your lease anyway."

"I like it with August," I say.

"See, I don't care about his age. Your dad said he was older. As long as he's taking care of you, I'm fine."

"Then what's up with Dad?"

"He was mad when he got home, but he stopped all that the next morning when he realized what he'd done. You were already out, and he's prideful, but we don't have your new address or phone number."

"Right. I'm not sure August would be comfortable with you guys showing up just yet."

Mom still isn't eating. By the time I'm finished with my Whopper Jr, she hasn't even finished her tea. My parents aren't bad people, and I know I'm not in the right to keep them out of my life all

of a sudden. August hasn't pressured me into doing this. Right now, I need my space so I can grow up.

"He probably has a bad impression of us," Mom says.

"I told him good things," I say. "He's not a kid, so he understands."

"Can you tell me a little about him?"

"Well, he's an artist, and a professor. He was in the Army. Umm. He's sixteen years older than me."

"Okay," Mom nods. "He sounds well rounded. What kind of art does he do?"

"He's a painter."

"Are you dating August Webb?"

"How do you know his name?"

"We have one of his paintings, sweetie. Did you never realize? It's in our dining room."

I try to recall a painting in the dining room, but the only one I can think of is a strange picture Dad bought two years ago of a sidewalk reflection. The pavement is gray and red with a reflection of a skyline in a rain puddle. I never bothered to look who painted it because I never gave it much thought. Did August paint that?

"Have you met August?" I ask.

"We bought it through a dealer," Mom says. "Your dad wanted to look into redecorating one of the restaurants and ended up with that painting instead."

A strange coincidence, but it's a small art community. Better his paintings than some of the horrific sculptures I saw at the last exhibition. I wonder how long it took August to paint that scene? He probably doesn't know where most of his paintings end up.

"Do you want my sandwich?" She asks.

"Sure," I say. "Thanks for lunch."

We walk in opposite directions. There was some awkward air about Mom, and I don't look forward to seeing her again. What I did to Dad was enough to change things in a way I can't undo.

My family isn't a priority right now. I'm going to college to actually do something. My goal is to become a high school teacher, and that's not a job people get rich doing, but most people graduating college don't have job experience or they can't find work they wanted. The only thing I want in life is stability with August. He's such a tremendous talent, and we may never see a gold toilet installed in our bathroom, but he deserves his time as an artist.

What does my writing mean to anyone but myself? It's not an obsession, and certainly not my goal for a career. I can never write again from this moment forward and still function. All of these rejection letters tell me I have little to offer the literary world right now. My talent amounts to how quickly I fill a notebook with my pencil scribbles.

August

When I was twenty-eight, there was a period when I couldn't paint. I didn't know what to paint. There wasn't anything I wanted to paint. Each day I sat on my couch watching TV. No books appealed to me. Music didn't interest me. Even in my most anguished depression, I paint. After drinking half a bottle, I paint.

With Ruth at her father's place half the time, I don't want to paint. With nothing else to do, I turn on the TV and watch *Golden Girls* reruns on Lifetime. When that's not on, I'll watch the first five minutes of *Seinfeld*, but turn it off so I can stare at the wall instead. I try conjuring up ideas. There're only so many portraits where I can depict loneliness and isolation.

What am I supposed to do? A creative mind without creation turns to mush, no doubt. There're people happy with practical lives where they work real jobs and come home to regular families. Ruth pushed her father away early in our relationship, yet now he's important to her again. Maybe she held it against me? Will she create animosity as a result?

William didn't have the wrong idea about my drinking. If I stop, maybe I can focus on myself rather than us? I never heard of a sober man's life getting worse when he quit. The AA meetings aren't for me, though I'm capable of quitting. Do I really want to?

Managed to get halfway through the day without a drop, though I slept until noon and have only been up for a couple of hours. Sitting in my studio, I look at a clean canvas and try to see anything. As I try to think, a car alarm goes off down the street. I imagine a little yellow car with its brake lights in sync with the nasal horn. It faces the wrong side of the road next to the sidewalk with a big bush to the left. Should I paint this image? If Van Gogh were alive, he would.

Focusing on the vehicle, I paint the yellow with some gray because it's an older model. Definitely not a flashy car belonging to a man in mergers and acquisitions. The driver's a barista who never wears a scarf for fear of seeming too stereotypical. He's walking toward the car. No, he's not late for work. The keys are locked in the car, and the alarm's not going off without the fob.

By the time the paint's drying, Ruth's coming in the kitchen door. I look at her and then I turn to my new work. No, this isn't akin to her at all. She's a woman ignorant to her own value, and it's clear when she wakes up next to me without running.

"Hey boom boom," She says. "Looks like you're finally tired of me."

"I'm not tired of you," I say. "I'm tired of you not being home."

"Me too. I want to talk about that."

"Then talk. I can hear you right here."

Ruth leans her head back and exhales before grabbing the stool next to my work bench and sitting next to me. I don't go for the dramatic exchanges at the kitchen table. If someone wants to talk, they need to speak to me now or I won't listen later. Ruth knows I won't.

"Your paintings are selling, August. I thought maybe it was a fluke and we'd have some extra money for a month or so, but William and his friends and their friends are still throwing money at you. Look at what you did today: a simple, thrown together picture of a car on the street. You could draw shit on a napkin and they'd buy it."

"You're not wrong."

"And you're about to start teaching again. So, I'm just going to say it: We need a new house."

"A new house?"

"You lived here for years before you even knew me. You can keep it as your studio if you want, but we've outgrown it. I've outgrown it. And here's the thing: My father's not well. He still owns all those restaurants and he needs someone to run them."

"You're giving up teaching?"

"I'm moving on from teaching. A lot of people change careers, and this one is a lot more lucrative. But my only catch in this plan, and you may not like it... I want Dad to move in with us so I can take care of him and spend the little time we have left together closer."

I suppose if I were him, I wouldn't want to give up my business to someone only to die in a nursing home. This is the logical evolution of family business. Ruth was always supposed to take over. I guess I expected her to give that up, though not really. I just didn't consider it.

"You're laying a lot on me," I say. "But you already know you're getting your way."

"Well hang on," Ruth says. "I don't want it just to be me getting my way."

"No," I say. "I'm not fighting you on this. If you find a house you want, I'll go."

Ruth looks at the painting and presses her chin into her palm for a moment. Her comment was clear: she doesn't like it. Sometimes our creations aren't for everyone to see. When she picks up the canvas and tosses it down on the tarp, my body clenches.

"You're better than that," She says. "Don't force it anymore."

When she walks out of the room, I pick up my picture and the colors are smeared. I take my hand and rub them together in a mess. It actually looks better this way. The car's melting into the road, which looks like a blackened river. Sure, it's not brilliant, but it's art.

After washing my hands in the kitchen sink, I grab the phone on the wall and dial up William. Maybe he'll be as honest as Ruth? She's pulling out of the driveway to no doubt act on her evil plans to improve our lives and find us a house. Maybe she already found one?

"I have something I finished today you might like," I say.

"I'll have a bottle ready for you when you get here," William says.

"Well, I haven't had anything to drink today. I just wanted your opinion on this."

"Oh?"

"Ruth didn't like it, so I made a few changes."

"Ruth didn't like one of your paintings? Maybe success is ruining you, August."

"Life is ruining me. Anyway, if you want to see it, I can drop it off with Desmond tomorrow."

"What? No. I'll come to you. Give me half-an-hour."

What the hell am I doing? Am I this starved for attention or praise? If I had a few shots in me, I wouldn't need anyone. But with Ruth wanting us to move and her dismissal of my new work, I obviously can't take change or rejection. I'm in my fifties. What do I need approval for? The painting wasn't terrible, so why would Ruth throw it on the floor? Admittedly, I like it better now, but she's never said anything negative about my personal paintings.

William follows me into the studio and looks at the morphed car painting on my easel. He sits down on my stool and scratches the back of his head. I hope he's honest like Ruth.

"Why is this smeared?" He asks.

"Ruth knocked it on the floor," I say. "I did the rest with my hand."

"Well, do you want to give her credit for that?"

Sure, I'll sign her name to the bottom and set the thing on fire. What am I supposed to say to that?

"It looks like you painted a scene," William says, "And then fell asleep on it."

"So you hate it."

"It looks good. That's never an issue with you. But I can tell this wasn't your intention."

"So what?"

"Nothing," William says. "This painting isn't your norm, but your worst is better than most college painter's best. Not to say it's your worst, either. I'm worried, August."

"Oh Jesus."

"How many times has Ruth thrown your stuff on the floor? How many days have you just decided to not drink? There's something off."

It wouldn't do to burn this bridge, but I don't want to endure an investigation into my life. Sometimes we have bad days. This one's going on a little long.

"I don't like change," I say. "I was okay with my life before all of this."

"Before people started paying for your paintings?"

"Ruth's father showed up one day and now she's always with him. She wants us to move into a new place and he's coming with us."

"And you don't want any of that."

"No," I say. "Sure don't."

"Well, what would make it more tolerable?"

"More time with Ruth. She's going to be busy running her father's restaurants. I'm going to leave my only home and share with a stranger. Doesn't seem fair or right."

"It's not. It's a lot to ask. Are you going through with all of this, August?"

"It's what she wants."

William walks over to my work bench and grabs a paint scraper. Handing it to me, he nods, and I know he's right. I stab the edge into the canvas and split the painting in half. Grabbing the cloth, I crumble my day's work, and feel as if I'm erasing all the evil inside me. Some days, I want to find all my paintings and throw them in a furnace. For once, I don't have to let a work go into the world and feel I could've done better.

"Tomorrow," William says, "You're going to paint what you want. I don't care if it's a fly on your medicine cabinet or an abstract feeling. It's going to be good. Don't show me anything you're not confident in, though."

Ruth

Dr. Cross lays my portfolio on her desk and I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling. I've been waiting the entire semester to hear what she thinks about my poetry. While not world renowned, Dr. Cross publishes a new book every other year and I own all of them, so maybe she's flattered by her influence in my work. Ripping a piece of paper out of her notebook, she writes something down, turns over the paper, and slides it over to me. Surely, she's giving me an A even if just for the amount of work I put into these?

"A seventy-seven?" I say.

"I grade based on attention to our course materials," She says. "How well a student incorporates elements of my lessons into their assignments. This is the only way I can objectively grade."

"So, I didn't write based on your professional expectations?" I ask. "But did you enjoy any of it?"

"I don't know that someone with my experience and age can find much to relate to in an undergrad's poetry, Ruth. You write a lot about men and the feelings a lot of girls your age have. I would rather you write a poem about a flower that displays the elements of the classroom than about an older man you fantasize about."

Normally, I suppose I'm passive and nod at everything my professors say. They're here to teach me, and I'm merely paying for the experience. Of course, without my Dad's money this semester, August is the one paying. He insisted I try a creative writing course just to see if I gained anything from it. Nothing coming out of Dr. Cross's face is helpful or constructive, though.

"You say *write what you know*," I say. "I live with a man about sixteen years my senior, and you're belittling me as a person right now. You could just say my poetry doesn't meet your expectations, but you added that I'm not womanly or mature enough to write anything you'd enjoy. That's not going to make me a better writer. Forgetting everything you said over the past three months might make me a better one, though."

Grabbing the folder off her desk, I don't bother looking at her reaction. Hopefully, I never have to see her again. To my slight dismay, she doesn't call after me in a dramatic gesture. I doubt she even thinks I'm right.

But what stings me the most is that she's not wrong about my poetry. After all these rejections from journals, I'm obviously not getting better with practice. Some people don't possess the talent for greatness. Maybe I'm meant to only be a high school teacher and live a modest life?

It's not like I'd get rich from my poetry. Sure, academic clout feels nice. A long vitae makes university's giddy. I am not a special person, though. My attempts at creativity certainly can't outweigh August's art. I don't know. What do the words mean if nobody reads them? I don't have a voice in written form because no one's listening.

As I walk off campus, I might as well check my P.O. Box. Why not add to the disappointment? Dr. Cross was a hero to me and someone I thought championed other women writers. Do I like her poetry because she's like me when she's really nothing like me? Her rejection of me as not only a writer but a person with feelings reveals the truth of human nature. We all want

to believe we're talented, and those who receive praise for that talent do not want others to be as talented as themselves.

I'm used to this entrance of hearing my feet on the old tile and my mail box illuminating in my sight. August came with me once to spray WD40 on the lock to help me open it easier. Usually I have nothing. Today, I have an envelope from the *Zion Review*. I clasp my portfolio in my arm and rip the inevitable rejection.

Miss Akamu,

We're pleased to inform you that we are accepting your work entitled "Victorian Submergence" for our early winter issue. Enclosed is a modest payment for publication of your work. Should you choose to not accept this, we will donate your fee to charity.

Well, I just opened the most ironic letter ever. Dr. Cross probably doesn't think I would ever get paid or published. I should walk back and slide this letter under her door. Instead, I'm going home to collapse in bed and not leave the house until next semester starts.

Sticking the letter in the portfolio, I stick the folder in the trash can. None of those poems will grant me anything but regret. If I want to seriously write, I need to kill what I love and start new projects. Some writers save everything they create. Why bother? At this moment, I am better than when I left Dr. Cross's office. I don't need a creative writing class to help me write academically when no one reads academics. That's why August's vitae is full of exhibitions and not research papers.

I get to the house while August is still at the university, so I fill up the kettle for us and take our favorite tea bags from the cabinet. Opening up the door to his studio, I see a sheet around his easel, though he normally doesn't cover his work. While I don't think it's an intrusion, August might not appreciate me peeking under. He's painting me again.

August makes me more attractive than I am, so I can't look in the mirror without feeling disappointed for a few days after he finishes a painting. Although I take some comfort in him sharing this obsession. I must possess something special for him to take a risk and live with a student sixteen years his junior. Maybe he's just desperate?

As the kettle screams, I let the sheet fall over the painting and close the door behind me. My nose doesn't belong in his world if I don't show him my poetry. It's not that he doesn't take interest; he doesn't ask to read my writing. If I want to read him something, August listens. Dr. Cross was probably right about me writing too much about him, so that's another reason I rarely offer to share with him.

I wish August was sitting here with me now. When Dr. Cross rejected me, I was so quick to tell her she was wrong. While she's not a nice person, I believe that I am a mediocre writer whose chasing talent. But what makes a good writer? I look at August's paintings and see something almost objectively pleasing. The reader's perception is what matters more than how we perceive ourselves.

I am more than my art, but I'm not more than Ruth. People like August seem like more than human. It's the human side of August I love.

August

I cannot imagine anyone else living here, yet I'm standing in an empty house again. When I bought this place, I knew I'd die drunk on the floor covered in paint. When Ruth moved in, it was no longer my coffin, though now I'm leaving and can't come back. For a few days, I considered adding a new room for Gregory, but that didn't fit Ruth's plan.

As I'm locking the door for the last time, a car pulls up the drive. Frederick Scott gets out and waves to me. Sticking his hands in his pockets, the only sound between us are his cowboy boots scraping against the pavement. You're supposed to grow out of the hipster stage, but he never had to because he's an art professor.

"I hear you're moving up in the world," Fredrick says. "Makes this a lot easier for me."

"You're not hiring me," I say.

"Enrollment is down. Our original projection for students was five thousand higher than who actually enrolled. These kids don't want to go to college anymore. Too expensive."

"Well, I was a shit teacher anyway."

"Hmm. I thought it would be more personable to tell you in person."

I can't think of a response. If I'm honest with myself, I didn't want to go back to teaching. It was just a way for me to claim back some independence. Seems to be taken away from me every chance now. I can paint anything I want without worrying if it makes money, yet I'm wishing I had that back. It wasn't so bad to paint for a few hundred bucks so I could work on one good one.

"I don't see a car," He says. "You need a ride to your new place?"

"I walked here," I say. "I can walk back."

Gregory reads a lot, so I guess that's how Ruth took such an interest in literature. She didn't tell me much about him. Whenever one of us turns on the TV, he keeps his face down in a book. If we play a LP, he doesn't react. Just keeps reading. When he's not in the living room flipping pages, Gregory cooks. So much so that Ruth hasn't made a meal since we've moved in. He must want me to gain weight, because every meal is served over rice or noodles.

By the time I'm back home, Ruth's passed out on the couch and Gregory's moving his lips along with the words on the page. He's only about twenty years my senior, so I don't see him as an old man despite his white hair and defined lines running down his face.

"You must love her a lot," He looks up from his book, "Because you're leaving that house behind for her."

"I lived there for over twenty years," I say. "Bought it with what little inheritance I had."

"Smart investment. Not unlike taking a young wife. You know, I was nine years older than Ruth's mother."

"I don't know much," I sit down.

"And I didn't know that when I bought one of your paintings, my daughter would leave us for you."

"Do you think she made a good choice?"

"I think I made the wrong choice by not embracing you. A man with his own home and steady income should put a father's mind to rest. Of course, you gave up something for her, didn't you?"

Gregory nods and turns back to his book. I lean over and rub my finger tip on Ruth's foot, which makes her twitch and look up at me. With her eyes still closed, I help her up and we go into the hallway to climb up the stairs. All these years, I didn't have to walk far to get in bed. Now I have to go up a floor. Gregory gets the downstairs bedroom.

After I turn the lights out and walk over to my new studio, I wonder if this change is good. Money only equates security and not having to sleep on the street. If I was the one making the call on a new place, I'd move out into the country with a generator, water well, and a few goats. I can't believe I've made it through this without a drink. Why the hell did I stop?

My greatest obstacle as a creator isn't money. Never was my drinking. Self-doubt creates a cloud that grows darker as loathing overshadows my true intent. I wallow in the melancholy, yet have an incredible brightness in my life with Ruth. Yes, Frederick showing up to tell me I wasn't getting my old teaching gig hurts as I consider that I once had a self-reliant life. What's so bad about having William throw business at me and Ruth suddenly taking on her father's chain?

There's a bottle of Crown Royal on top of the fridge downstairs. Gregory's gone to bed. I take out a half-glass and marvel at the emptiness before listening to the whiskey tingle. Doesn't even need ice. A shot feels good in me. That flavor moves me. Another drink might move me more.

I'm stuck here. Each sigh reminds me that time continues even if I wish to pause and figure out what I'm supposed to do. Sure, I'll keep painting. That old one that Gregory has in the dining room we never use is a reminder of what I used to be capable of. A true artist evolves, because without progression you regress.

Let me see if I can finish this bottle. I can crawl back upstairs and smear paint on my face to scrub on a canvas. Ruth's found me in worse circumstances. This time she might find me dead.

Ruth

August sips from his mug without a complaint, though his tea can't be more than lukewarm. I figured the water would still be hot by the time he got home. He listened to me for about ten minutes while I told him all about Dr. Cross and my dramatic move with my poetry in the trash can. Rubbing the tabletop, he seems jittery, and he hasn't spoken since he sat down.

"What about your day?" I ask.

"Not much to talk about," August says. "I turned in my final grades this morning. Frederick Scott was in the department office being a fucking prick."

"Isn't he that weird guy with the big mustache?"

"That's him. So, I could've come home a little earlier, but I decided to walk a while. And I thought. I thought about you. You living here. Because everyone in the department knows I'm sleeping with a student."

"Is that why Dr. Scott was being a prick?"

"Yeah," August nods. "So, I have saved a lot of money over the years living by myself. There's a way to rectify all of this."

Reaching into his jacket pocket, August sets down a box in front of me. My butt clenches so tightly that my vagina tingles. When he reveals a diamond ring, I involuntarily shriek. It sounds like a cat when you accidently step on its paw. For once, August smiles, and I take the ring out and put it on my finger without considering what this means. I just agreed to marry him without him asking.

"I've never seen a woman react that way," August says.

"What? Do you want me to cry and wave my face?"

"You can't have that without marrying me, you know?"

At no point did I consider August would want to marry me. I try to be honest with myself, and an older man generally wants a dalliance with a lady sixteen years his junior. This admission was never painless, but I never let my insecurity show. Wasting time fretting over the future when you have a dream in the present is the worst way to wake up.

"Unfortunately," He says, "I don't have any friends or family for a wedding."

"I don't want that," I say. "Let's just go get a marriage license."

"We still have to be married by a justice of the peace, I think."

"Fuck it. Let's go in the morning."

August slides his hand around my wrist and pulls me over the table to meet him in the middle. In these embraces, I don't want to write anymore. My ability will never capture the feeling. Goals aren't as easy to touch as what's in front of me.

"No one will ever know who I really am but you," August says.

"That's the cheesiest shit I've ever heard," I say.

"Well, how do you feel?"

"I'm marrying you, so isn't it obvious?"

I wake up around three in the morning with August on his stomach. Since I don't have to get up for school in a couple of weeks, I get out of bed and go to the kitchen for a glass of water and go over to the couch. Turning a lamp on, the diamond on my left hand glimmers and feels alien attached to me.

Am I giving anything up by marrying the first man I fall in love with? Denying myself exposure to greater things in life? Can I do better than August? Does any of that matter if I love him? I definitely want him. In a few hours, I'll be legally bound to August. Not long ago, that meant a woman was a man's property. Is there a side to him I haven't seen?

There might come a time when I have my parents back in my life. They're missing out on this, but they didn't give me any indication they wanted in. I suppose I'm robbing them of the opportunity to see their daughter married to a decent man. What is a decent man and what the hell does it matter?

I have a lot of life to figure all that out. Knowing what I want and taking it is the privilege of adulthood. That means I have to be my own parent, and I give myself permission to love freely.

Setting the glass in the sink, I walk back into the bedroom and reclaim my cold spot in the bed. August turns over and wraps his arm around my waist. His breathe warms my ear. Maybe it won't be this good forever, but it's good enough for now.

Charles Price

The Replacements begin "I Will Dare" in a wail of guitar feedback as I walk into Club 866, passing the bar and a group of girls with bleached hair, cropped and curled, leather jackets, and red lipstick shining under Rayban glasses. There's always a small batch of Madonna wannabes lurking in the punk clubs. Though I wouldn't fuck any of them, I'm certain they wouldn't give it up to me. I'm not edgy or corporate enough. That's what those kind of girls want: Paul Westerberg with a messy Jeff Beck haircut or a father figure in a pinstripe suit.

I couldn't tell you my type, though. When I go into a club like 866, I'm here for the music and a few Heinekens. Harvard girls were enough for four years. Back home in Atlanta, I'm away from coffee shops at 3 PM and midnight study sessions ending in a girl's first foray into anal. Instead, I wake up to the sound of my father's Porsche cranking at 8 AM and trying to waste my time around the house until he's back and I can borrow the car.

So, I sit on a stool, order my beer, and turn to the band as the crowd talks in their cliques and dance without rhythm. I learned from the shows I caught in Cambridge that concerts and gigs aren't for the music but socialization. It's fucking stupid, but true. As long as I keep myself against the bar and hold this bottle, no one should bother me.

"Charles Price."

Giving my best James Bond eyebrow twitch, which probably looks more like Roger Moore in *Octopussy* rather than Sean Connery lighting a cigarette in *Dr. No*, I glare at the voice and find a potentially balding hairline and brown curls overlooking some asshole in a soccer jersey. Figured the *Animal House* look never caught on.

"It's Tommy," He holds up his Miller High Life can. "Tommy Welty."

This Tommy guy expects me to know him, but judging from his outfit, he's not Harvard material. He's a townie with drop-out practically tattooed on his unshaven upper lip. Must be from high school or some party that I can't remember thanks to several benders that got me through the past four years.

"I'm here with my sister, Nicole," He says, "But I kinda lost track of her. You like the band?"

"Yeah, I own all of their albums on vinyl, CD, and reel to reel," I say. "Who are you?"

He pounces on the stool next to me and slams me in the back, my beer spilling near a pair of leather boots holding up a black chick with a green mohawk. Since I never like to waste a drop, I take the half-empty bottle and pour the rest on Tommy's red shorts before smacking him in the face with my other hand.

I imagined that he'd fall on the floor and not get back up, but fights always begin when you expect to win without bruises. I take his right fist in the stomach and my bottle ends up flying behind me into the crowd. I'd let him hit me again if we can get one of the local poseurs in the face.

But I know how to take a good punch. Tighten your muscles and get up as the opponent pulls back for another, and lean into his chest with your shoulder, especially if he's facing away from a wall or sturdy bartender. And he's caught off guard that this guy he thinks he knows is so eager to fight him, because he's always the guy other guys avoid at the parties. Too drunk and heavyset to fuck with, and too willing to get a bruise to show off.

"Even if I remembered your cum glazed face," I shout over Westerberg's screaming, "I'd still want to taste your blood."

Because I don't lose fights. Father paid a few emergency room bills and gave me some stern lectures over the dorm's payphone, but I never let a Belushi stomp my ass. And right when I'm about to jump him again to get my teeth into his face, some bitch pulls him away and holds her hand up to me as Tommy recovers in a slouch behind her.

"He's drunk," She says, "So stop trying to kill him."

It's her stern glare that makes me obey. Harvard girls only know how to give you the resting bitch face. This is the look your mother gave you when she was cleaning and couldn't deal with your shit anymore. Her natural blonde hair streaming over pale shoulders in a white strapless dress makes me straighten up and let my ass cheeks relax.

"Sorry, Tommy," I fake a laugh and take a step back to make the apology appear real.

"Guess we both had a few too many."

"Well, now I have to drive him home," She says. "Maybe you need a ride too?"

"Are you his girlfriend?" I ask.

"Sister. I'm Nicole."

"Well, I'm Charles," I say. "And I'd like to buy you both a drink to apologize."

We leave 866 in the Porsche and head to another bar closer to downtown. Though Nicole doesn't comment on the car or my apparent wealth as I expect any girl to, Tommy passes out in the backseat, so we're left to our silence with the ambient engine running behind us. The way she looks out the window with no regard for my existence makes the quiet light reflecting from the surrounding buildings feel colder than chills gripping my spine. I roll down the windows to let in some summer air.

Nicole wakes Tommy and we head inside as R.E.M.'s "Fall on Me" plays on a jukebox across the wooden floor. There're no New Wave fags or girls who watch too much MTV. Instead, a few suits hold conversations across circular tables with their martinis and seltzer waters. No one dares sit at a booth, so we find one in the back and I wave to get the bartender's attention in vain. Nicole pokes at Tommy to keep him up.

"What's your favorite beer, Tommy?" I ask.

"Pabst Blue Ribbon."

"Jack and Coke," Nicole says while avoiding eye contact.

I walk over to make an order, and I get a Jack and Coke for myself to appear somewhat empathetic to Nicole. Her indifference to me and concern for her brother puzzles me because she's better than him. With breasts that fit in a pushup bra and thick thighs in a white dress, Nicole could pick up any academic or townie jock her legs could fit around. But she was at 866 with her brother like she was babysitting when she could've been at home rereading *The Great Gatsby* for the eighth time.

"I usually fight Harvard undergrads," I say. "Not many come in your brother's size. A few, but most are particularly plain."

"Harvard?" She looks up. "What's your major?"

"I have a bachelors in pre-law," I say. "I'm going to Harvard Law this fall."

"When are you applying?" Nicole asks.

"My father graduated from there, so I don't really have to apply. They've already accepted me."

Instead of smiling and crossing her legs, Nicole shrugs and goes back to her drink and dopey brother, who managed to finish his PBR already. She's not going to settle for a line. I have to hook her with a story. Some want a thriller about a fight between me and two guys behind a dorm hall after midnight. Others like the tales about past flings where I got laid in the library by some girl dressed in an orange sweater with black rimmed glasses and short bangs. Nicole only gets drier in each scenario.

"It's hard to decompress after four years away at school," I say. "I haven't had a conversation with my father since I applied. We coexist and go through the necessary nods and grunts, but I suppose since mother died he's uninterested in connecting with me beyond his expectations."

"Oh," Nicole says. "When did your mother die?"

"I was fifteen," I say.

Now she sees me as a little more sympathy worthy. As the alcohol settles in her veins, the vision of her injured brother turns into an amusing memory rather than anything vaguely traumatic. He won't remember it in the morning, after all.

"My father doesn't spend much time at home anyway," I say. "Too busy with work and socializing with Atlanta's elite douchebags."

"My dad is one of those elite douchebags," Nicole says. "I've even met Kenneth Price, though I knew little about him until now."

"So, that's how Tommy knows me."

"And you went to high school together," Nicole points out. "I was two grades below you."

Me not noticing her before tonight doesn't bold well in my favor. If I had some memory of a Tommy or Nicole, maybe we could have an *oh yeah* moment. However, I'm now the self-involved dick who punched her brother when he was just being chummy with me again.

"I wish I could say that I'm different," I say. "At least in a good way."

"You've had a few drinks," Nicole says. "I've done worse."

"Oh really? Show me."

Walking over to a table of three men in their lawyer get-ups, Nicole speaks to a ginger bearded man with a half-glass, which I assume holds some aged scotch or something else my father would brag about but never serve. He doesn't hesitate to smile because she's a pretty girl and not some bum from the street asking for a drink. Nicole holds up his left hand and points to the empty ring finger, biting her lip in a grip similar to a wolf licking its lips before attacking prey.

Tommy shuffles out of the booth, and I don't want to stop him from getting in Nicole's way because that's probably just as entertaining, but he instead goes to the jukebox and pulls out a quarter. As if choreographed, the Pretenders' "Message of Love" pumps out of the small speakers when Nicole and the unmarried yuppie begin dancing in rhythm to the guitar rattling the tables.

When she pulls up her dress to reveal red panties and black heels, there's not a man in the place with his eyes off of her. We're wondering what'll come off next as the song progresses deeper

into an erotic beat. And just as the ginger beard man places his fingertips on the rim of the lace, Nicole swings around with a slap in his face, laughing as she backs away in a tease.

I expect the fucker to hit her back, but he laughs back and keeps the dance going. Tommy, leaning against the jukebox, snarls at this. Maybe we should interrupt. Then the audience would balk and cause more damage. Nicole's found her man for the night, I figure.

"Looks like she's got a ride," I say to Tommy. "Want me to drop you off?"

"Nah," He slaps away the notion. "She's already chosen who she's going home with. It's not him."

"She's not interested in me," I say.

"Why do you think I talked to you at 866?" He laughs. "She asked me to. She remembers you from high school."

I'm the older guy she wrote about in her journal after school. The romantic interest in those short stories she no doubt penned while a freshman in college. The drunk brother routine wasn't supposed to end with bloody noses, but I still look as handsome to her with Tommy's sweat still on my knuckles.

"I don't mean to come off as more of an asshole," I say, "But I'd like to ditch you so I can hang out with your sister."

"Go on, man," Tommy says. "My party's over."

With the lone quarter that lies under my wallet and keys, I punch in the numbers for Tom Waits' "Heartattack and Vine," and let the rude guitar riff interrupt everyone's train of thought. Lighting the King Edward cigarillo I stole from my father, I let a cloud of cancer engulf me before turning around and seeing Nicole grinding in rhythm to Waits' growling through the speakers.

Pulling her hips to mine, I dance with this girl I've known for little under an hour, but I'm surprised at how taken I am with her. I haven't wanted to impress a girl since I was acne faced in Cambridge.

And when she pulls me in for the kiss, I'm away from the music, yuppies, and smell of cigar smoke. My eyes shut me into a black room where the feeling of Nicole's lips pulls out my ego and lets it fall into the abyss. She pulls away, and I'm back in the bar, but I'd rather be in that nothingness. I try for another, and she whispers in my ear.

"I know where we can get some blow."

We're in a Buckhead apartment building, and while I'm imagining Lennox Square's plush crowds of wealthy assholes who never look you in the eye as you walk past their Bloomingdale bags, a bearded man with a spot of gray in his receding hairline answers the door. His grin says to Nicole, *I knew you'd be back*, as he silently lets us enter a roomful of people over thirty-five. Fleetwood Mac's *Tango in the Night* album plays on a turntable with a Mcintosh tube amp connected to PSB tower speakers, which might impress me if not for the advent of CD.

These men wear pinstripe suits with their ties still wrapped tight enough for a Monday morning board meeting. Pilsner bottles collect on a black glass top coffee table in the center of a wrap around sofa, and a mirror reflects the remains of cocaine as a woman in silk stockings and a

black sequin dress inhales a line. This would be exciting if it wasn't the exact shit going on in a Harvard dorm room on a Tuesday afternoon.

I'm guessing the bearded guy who gave Nicole the perverted glare at the door is the dealer, and I have some cash to score, but she comes up with a baggy and pulls me into the nearby bathroom. Suddenly, I feel like I'm in an airplane because of the toilet being an inch from my knees as soon as we walk in.

We both bump, the high lifting my brain up as I bite at Nicole's lips. She's pulling her panties down by the time she's against the wall and my teeth are in her neck. Pouring the baggy down her breasts, I take in more coke while grabbing her by the hair, forcing her over the sink, and my hard dick rips into her salivating body.

Nicole's moaning echoes in the chamber, and I don't care if the others outside hear us, though the music is probably loud enough to drown out her pussy throbbing on me. And when I pull out and cum against the wall, she drops to her knees and licks off the remnants from my cock. Before I collapse to the floor, she reaches her finger up to my nose for another bump. My pants are back on and we're back in the party before I process that we just fucked in a upscale drug dealer's bathroom.

We feel more out of place than when we came in, yet Nicole's pulling me toward the beer bottles resting in beautiful ice crystals, as if we need booze to combat the coke high. The others glance over in between their conversations and probably wonder why we're here after buying our high and snorting most of it in the bathroom. We're certainly not going to talk about the stock market or even Harvard. I'd rather not think about Cambridge at all.

I drain the bottle as Nicole's dealer talks her up about selling to Sean Penn last week and how his girlfriend gets her hair done by the same stylist as Cher when she visits the kid she had with Gregg Allman. I'm an ornament against the wall, and I'd like to leave rather than listen to this assclown talk anymore. These aren't my people. My days as a student may never return, but I'll never let the yuppies consume me in their excuses for social lives.

"Can we get out of here?" I ask.

"Come on, Harvard boy," Nicole slaps my shoulder. "Show us how you poindexters party."

Tossing the bottle against the room, not caring if it strikes anyone, the glass grenades in the kitchen, and a record scratch would make the moment a bit more humorous as everyone turns to look at me. The coke makes me a little too confident in my stupidity, yet I'm well aware that made no sense.

"These people don't even fuck," I say. "They make love with the lights out in the missionary position. I want to fuck!"

Who snorts blow in a polite manner? They're drinking imported beer like it's water. This isn't a party so much as a funeral for fun. I grab Nicole and kiss her hard against her mouth, our teeth knocking against each others, and pull away as if displaying what real passion looks like to these suits.

"Nicole," The Cosby sweater wearing drug dealer says, "Take your boyfriend home."

It's not until we're back in the car that I realize my faux pas. Of course, Nicole doesn't care, and she's snorting the last of the coke on my Porsche's dash. She mutters something about liking my confidence, and laughs as I start the engine.

We're a couple of young idiots in a city full of drugs, bullets, and rotting flesh. But that's what makes it fun for us. And when I consider that we met after I punched her brother at *866* tonight, I'm surprised she's in my car at all. Her cum is still drying on my dick too.

"Let's get lost," Nicole says. "I'm not ready to go home."

When I was sixteen, father gave me mother's Mustang after she died, so I went on random night drives around Atlanta. There's an exit on I-75 between Kennesaw and Marietta with plenty of dirt roads that lead to nowhere. Usually abandoned farmhouses or open fields. If I wanted to frighten a girl, I'd take her out there and we'd have a quickie before I dropped her back off. If Nicole thinks she can keep up with me, then I'll see how far she'll let me take this.

As "Invisible Touch" plays on Q93, Nicole starts to dance in her seat as she sings along to Phil Collins. This resembles a date I'd go on in high school rather than in Cambridge. I'd go to the bars, meet a girl with black rimmed glasses who wore sweaters Bill Cosby would envy, and listen to them talk about Sylvia Plath or how their misogynist English professor gave them a D on an essay. Then, I ate them out in the restroom before we ended up in their dorm. The girls who seemed to hate men the most would give the best blowjobs.

Nicole came off as reserved at first, but she's not at war with the world who doesn't care about her problems. She's reveling in life, and that's what I forgot about in college. When I go back to Cambridge for law school, will I fall back into my undergrad lifestyle? Waking up to beer bottles lined in my window seal and phone numbers that I trash doesn't hold any excitement. Going back means putting up with professors' games where you play into their vanity rather than glean knowledge from their overblown minds. Then I wait another couple of years for another piece of paper that cost thousands of my father's dollars, and I leave Cambridge behind for a career I don't want.

Yet nothing I learned comes to mind when I kiss Nicole. Four years as an undergrad wasn't an education so much as a social experience. For all the poetry and novels I devoured, there were many more hookups and shots of Canadian Mist. What will I remember from tonight in the morning? It could be like the many forgotten nights that come back in nightmares and girls slapping me in the face for not knowing their name.

Getting off on the exit, I drive us down the two lane road until I see a dirt road on the right that I haven't noticed before. Before the wheels hit the loose gravel, Nicole's reaching for my belt and unfastening my pants. As my foot grows heavy on the accelerator, her lips cover my swollen head, and I close my eyes for a moment to know what this really feels like. The leather seat against my hair, the Porsche speeding against the Earth, and a beautiful woman licking my dick. I'm about to cum when I open my eyes and see a demonic silhouette in a clearing.

Shielding Nicole's head with my left hand, I try to steady the wheel as my foot moves to the brake. As my dick splurges inside Nicole's mouth, we're inches away from a stoop. Above our heads is a giant cross, and I can make out the steeple as my eyes adjust to the darkness.

Lifting up, Nicole begins rattling with laughter, pointing at the church in front of us. The moonlight reveals overgrown weeds and broken windows, and there's no sign of a person anywhere. Before we speak, Nicole opens her door and jumps on the front steps almost in one motion, so I pull up my pants and follow her inside.

I expect a hobo or birds to be camped out in here, but it's smells too moldy to support any long term life form. The floorboards feel wet as if each step I take could mean my foot will go through them. A hole in the ceiling lets in some moonlight, and as Nicole leans against the pulpit, her face reflects across the room as I approach. Letting down her panties, she turns around, hands on the barrister, and I bend down to eat her from behind.

When I wipe my face and go inside her, I look up to see Jesus looking down at me from a deformed cross that hangs over the choir pit. The more I pump inside Nicole, he's looking through me as if I'm desecrating his house, but this place hasn't been a church in decades. There's no God to judge me for this, and I wouldn't give a shit if there was. Her pussy feels so warm in this swamp of a coffin.

Once the adrenaline comes down after I pull out, I look around the church. This place hasn't seen life since I was born. Given the location, it was probably either dominated by farmers or former slaves. As Nicole adjusts her panties and walks toward the door, I see a man standing behind the cross, but when I blink, I think it must be my vision adjusting to the dark.

Pulling my arm, Nicole guides us back to the car, before whispering, "Take me home, Charles."

I don't remember coming in last night. My face rests in each palm, the air conditioning chilling my torso as I rise from bed, my underwear being the sole survivor of my outfit. Maybe father won't be up yet since it's a Saturday, I think. Could be Sunday. The dry lips and tongue smack against each other as the veins in my head beat like a gated drum set. I'll get a glass of water and Tylenol before I pass out again.

My legs go faster down the stairs than I'd like, and I hear the television on in the living room. Did he hear me? He could've left it on last night or before going out this morning. No, he's sitting on the couch with an orange juice nearly emptied on the side table. I don't say anything as I grab a glass from the counter in hopes that he won't initiate conversation. We haven't spoken since I got back from Cambridge yesterday.

"I tried some burglary cases when I started out," Father seems to talk to himself. "I don't recall any of them getting a glass of water on their way out."

I won't say *hi* or *good morning, father*, because I'd like his comment to stand and dither in the air between us. Instead, he stands up and gives me a smirk that can't be sincere. My blood seems to push harder than before with father looking at me. What will he pressure me into or judge me about today? He has an agenda for his image rather than my happiness.

"You don't call for three months," He says, "And don't even acknowledge me when I'm in front of you. Come over here."

Father hugs me, slapping my back as he glances at my sculpted abs and mumbles a phrase to himself. I didn't want to end up pudgy and gray like him. Taking care of myself is the first step in

not becoming Kenneth Price. My brother, Al, doesn't go to the gym at all and maintains the same weight he had in high school, though. Mother's genes must help.

"Who picked you up from the airport?" Father asks.

"Al and Pat," I say.

"I very much doubt they had you out past my bedtime."

My father's sarcasm makes me wish a dog would bite into my leg, because his words sting more. He never spanked or beat me, but that might require some interest in if I know right from wrong. Indifference is still neglect even when your parents have enough money for whatever you want.

"I was out," I say.

He pulls a handkerchief from his shirt pocket and gestures at my nose.

"See if you can blow out what's left of that powder," Father slaps the rag on my shoulder.

I turn to go upstairs, and his chuckle resembles an eighteen wheeler letting out brake pressure. He thinks that I'm self-centered and reckless, yet I maintained a 4.0 at Harvard and got into law school without his connections. I don't want to be an attorney, but I can't do anything else with my degree.

There's a napkin on my nightstand, and under the smudged phone number is the Waffle House logo. Makes sense because I didn't eat on the flight home. I'll call Nicole as soon as I shower and clean up. Surely last night wasn't an endgame.

When I'm dressed, hair still wet and reeking of cucumber shampoo, father's on the phone in the kitchen, presumably with Al since I hear my name brought up. He never talks about me to clients or partners. I visited his office two summers ago with Al, and father didn't have any pictures of us. Just one of mother on his desk.

"Al," Father says, "He's in here, so I'll talk when you come over tomorrow."

"Why the sudden interest in your children?" I ask.

Hanging up the phone, father motions my comment away as he begins to put up the dried dishes next to the sink. When mother died, Al was married to Pat, and I was fifteen. Father took over the housekeeping and cooking, but mostly for himself. I stayed in my room, making sure to come home in the evening, often eating fast food to avoid dinner on the TV trays. Father sat on the couch with his hamburger steak or grilled chicken chewing without a sound, and neither of us spoke. It took me fifteen years to realize that we had nothing to talk about, and our conversations revolved around Harvard or how he'd be out the following night due to a case.

I'm twenty-two, and I'm looking at a man who donated sperm into a woman who happened to carry a receptive egg fourteen years after already having a son. Al was their child. The one they nurtured and groomed to be Kenneth Price's successor in Atlanta law. I was an afterthought that they checked on every so often to make sure I hadn't stopped breathing. To break my solitude at home, I took up teenage activities like getting laid and drinking.

"What are you planning to do this summer?" Father asks. "Get high and catch the clap?"

"I thought heroin was a depressant?" I chide. "Al lied to me."

"Your brother barely drinks," He says. "Meanwhile, I've seen you go through a twelve pack of my Red Stripe the same night I bring it home."

"Get a mini-fridge for your bedroom," I suggest. "You can afford it."

"Yet I can't buy you manners," He says. "I suppose that's my fault."

I'm aware of my ingratitude, and my position as a white collar kid with a degree from Harvard doesn't mean I'm a good person. There're better men who deserve what I have, but none of us ask to be born. You can have money and possessions, but one day you die and it doesn't matter. People don't remember you for the big house or seven figure bank accounts. They need a emotion to grasp. A feeling that goes with your image. What hurts me is that if I told father that he died and I wouldn't miss him, he'd be able to say the same.

"Do what you want," Father shrugs. "Take the Porsche, stay out, get drunk or high, and come back in four days without any sleep. You're still young. I get it."

"Sure," I say.

"I'm out."

After he's out the door and the garage opens, I go to the fridge to find a twelve pack of Red Stripe on the second shelf next to the orange juice. There's nothing else in here. When I look in the freezer, it's empty. When I'm at school, this must be my father's life. It's as if he bought the juice just to make himself look more casual during our earlier conversation. Maybe in all this time alone, he's realizing that I'm not his son, but a passerby in his home.

When Nicole gets into the Porsche, she's wearing a pale orange dress that gives her blonde hair a similar appearance to fire. Popping in a CD, Nicole skips ahead six tracks to "The Look of Love" by ABC, and kisses me before I can object to her selection or skipping songs instead of listening to an album from start to finish. Biting my lip, she pulls away to buckle up and adjust her hair in the rearview mirror.

"Where we headed?" She asks.

Since my father bluffed me, I'm driving us to Savannah for a night on the river and morning at the beach. We'll have to buy some blow beforehand, but the beer can wait until we get a room. If we survive a short trip together, we might make for a decent couple. At least until I return to Cambridge.

"Think we could stop by Buckhead?" I ask. "I want to surprise you."

"Honey, if you're buying the coke," Nicole leans over, "You don't have to surprise me."

Nicole knocks on the apartment door from last night, but this time there's silence on the other side. The bearded man answers the door with his eyes not leaving Nicole as he greets us. Introducing himself to me as David, I exchange the same pleasantry while pulling out my wallet. Instead of getting in and out so we can head to Savannah, David invites us inside.

A man with thick white hair and a pale complexion smokes a cigarette while lounging on the leather couch that faces the balcony. Without turning, he gestures with his fore fingers and thumb to acknowledge us. He seems ridiculous, but Nicole's expression alters from her gleeful smile to a knowing cringe. She recognizes this stranger.

"Sorry, Jonathan," David says, "I'd normally turn them away, but she's... Well, you've met Nicole."

Jonathan nods and takes a drag from the cigarette. I guess it wasn't cool to let us in, but what the fuck does he care? It's David's apartment. I'm growing impatient with the formalities.

"How much will three hundred buy us?" I ask.

As David gives Jonathan an uneasy smirk, Jonathan chuckles to himself and rises from the couch. He's wearing mirrored sunglasses, but his lips look so red against pale skin that his teeth resemble a preying wolf. Holding out his hand, Jonathan reveals a plastic bag large enough to knock a thick skulled cop out.

"Umm..." David says, "I'm actually settling something with Mr. Zigler here, Charles. If you two will just wait..."

"I remember how this went," Jonathan says. "Back when I bought my first uncut from a Cuban called Presidiario. I could see my knees through my pants by the time I took my hands off them."

Nicole wraps her hand around my arm and begins to walk backwards, but Jonathan gives the bag to David and approaches us. As David runs over to a safe that's hidden in his floorboard, Jonathan looks down at me and lets out a cloud of nicotine in my face.

"Charles?" He asks. "Charles what?"

"Charles Price," I say.

"Any relation to Al Price?" He asks.

"He's my brother."

David looks up from his safe, several bills rolled in his palms, as Jonathan puts a hand on my shoulder. What the fuck is this guy doing? Of course, he's a drug supplier, and my brother works as a prosecutor for Cobb County, but he's not notorious at all. I don't even know if he's a good attorney.

"Your brother put my brother in prison," Jonathan says.

He breathes in through his teeth as saliva builds and dries in his lips before finishing his thought.

"But my brother is better off in prison," Jonathan says. "Safer."

"Sorry," I shrug.

"David," Jonathan turns around, "Make sure Nicole and Charles get a discount this time. Give them a little more for their money."

David throws Jonathan's cash into a brief case on the coffee table, returning it to him as Jonathan begins to leave. He's bizarre, but I probably won't see him again. Hopefully he doesn't have a vendetta for my brother. I worry more about Al than myself in that situation given that I'm the hardened child and he's the spoiled one.

Nicole looks through the peep hole to watch Jonathan as he calls the elevator, and David taps me on the shoulder with a bag of coke and a expressionless glare. Obviously, I should be afraid too, though I'm unaware of Jonathan Zigler. I imagine a lot of coke suppliers strike fear in people.

"See you again," David says.

An explosive beat shakes my bedroom floor. When I try to run down the stairs, my legs cannot pick up speed without me running out of breath. As Phil Collins begins to sing "Mama," I look in the dining room to see my parents eating lunch together. Mother faces away from me, and father's laughing at something she's muttering. When I look beyond her blond hair, I see that the fork she's holding up to her face hovers over an empty place. Her eyes, nose, and lips withdrawn into her skin as she hums along with the song blaring on the stereo. Father's still laughing, and when I look to him for help, he dissolves into his chair. The backdoor leading to the garage opens to reveal a shadow entering the kitchen, and it's the figure I saw in the abandoned church the night before.

Nicole's facedown beside me. I look toward the bedside table to see the time, and the alarm clock reads broken symbols. The lamp's bulb lies in shards mixed in with cocaine residue. As I try to rise, my eyes force themselves shut and the sudden rush of pain flushes into numbness as I get on my feet. Heineken bottles fall over as I make way to the bathroom. You can always tell you had a good night when there's nothing to remember.

Facing myself in the mirror of the dark bathroom, I see my mother in my twenty-two years where I grew into this mess. The coke and beer make for a fun time, but the best part is memory loss. I'm working on erasing all I experienced as my mother's son. Unfortunately, I can only forget what my gray matter will allow to die.

That dream reminded me that I'm trying to erase someone I once pined for. A son needs his mother, and despite my indifference to my father's neglect, I kept clamoring. My parents already raised one son. I'm twenty-two, but Al is thirty-seven with a pregnant wife. We don't relate other than our blood.

I know all I want from Nicole is attention. As soon as she goes back to her own life, I'll find someone else. But I'd like for her to abandon that for me so I wouldn't have to. My selfishness hinders my ability to truly love. That's why I'll never be able to settle. I keep women near until they flee, and I'm on to another to fix what the last broke. What they mangled, I'm unsure, because I haven't cried over a girl since high school.

Though dreams are subconscious gatherings of daily events, this one felt too significant to write off as my brain melting in my sleep. My parents didn't love or despise me so much as tried to forget my existence each day. Mother's death was when I realized they didn't mean anything to me because I didn't cry like father or Al. In the same room as my mother's fresh corpse, I looked up at Pat as she tried to comfort Al, and she gasped at me because I smiled. Not because I was happy. It was what I did whenever I met someone's gaze. My false amusement was a social reflex.

When Nicole opens her eyes, I'm dressed to leave. There's an urgency growing in my spine that makes me want to run home. I'm not sure what my instincts want to resolve, but I'm through with this lost weekend.

"What if your father's home?" Nicole asks.

Pulling into the driveway and pushing the garage remote, the parked Land Rover tells me Kenneth Price is indeed home. If he sees me with a girl, I'm sure he'll make some snide comment, but he won't object. He only bitches because he wants me to think he cares. I've yet to hear him say No to me.

When I walk to the door, I see a shadow against the blinds. There's someone inside waiting for me. Nicole tugs on my shoulder, and the shadow's gone when I glance back. Inside, the TV's going, but I don't see father.

"His car's here," I say. "Father?"

A television audience laughs. When I go to turn the set off, I see father lounging on the sofa with his eyes shut. I never knew him to fall asleep in the living room, though he's getting older. I don't want to wake him, but this TV's too loud. Nicole leans over to see him, and she stifles a laugh with her palm.

"You don't look anything like him!" She whispers.

"Al does," I say. "Maybe that's why mother favored him."

Nicole peers at the old man and cocks her head. Putting a finger under his nostrils, I wonder what the hell she's doing and slap her wrist away.

"I don't think he's breathing," She says. "Try waking him."

"Whatever," I say. "He's sleeping."

She starts clapping and saying *Mr. Price*, and I groan as she keeps up the charade that my sixty-something father is dead. I'd dance on his corpse, but I'm not that lucky. But she gives me the same look Pat did. The surprise and awe that inspires discomfort and dissonance. It's like an out of tune orchestra trying to hit the same note as the conductor sips his bourbon.

"I'm calling 911," She says.

Now that my father's in the ground, I have no time to reflect thanks to all the strangers roaming my home. Wearing black and grey, they're mirroring one another's sorrow, however real or false. Al sits on the sofa with his pregnant wife, Pat, and talks to each person offering their condolences. Pat insisted on holding the post-funeral reception at my house, and Al put up for the catering. I'd like to kick them all out, but I suppose it's only polite to let the people my father liked more than me to see what remains of his existence.

None of them recognize me as Kenneth Price's son, either. That gives me the freedom to take a bottle of Red Stripe from the fridge and lounge in the front study. Closing my eyes between each sip, I resign to my fate. No one will shut up long enough for me to think about the events of the past three days.

Father died. I'm trying to muster some feeling about him; even hatred or happiness. The man leaves me apathetic towards his memory, because I did plenty of stewing about his indifference while in college.

An elderly woman with a cane makes her way to the bookcase containing volumes of classic literature, law text books, and various versions of the Bible father collected. She notices a picture of me on one of the shelves and turns to the drinking sloth nearby trying to figure if I'm truly related to Kenneth, a man she probably remembers as passionate about law. A widower who finally got to meet his departed wife in heaven.

"Are you Kenneth's son?" She points. "You can't be Al?"

"Charles," I nod without sitting up.

"I'm sorry for your loss," She comes nearer. "This must be very traumatic for you."

"Sure."

Rising, I walk out of the room and up the stairs. This is my house and I'll go to my room if I want. Who knows how much longer I can stay here? Al will probably want me to move in with him and sell this place. Pat would love that. The ever dutiful housewife with a useless masters degree in Geology. I assumed she was barren until Al let one in past the goalie. They say it's a girl, and Pat wants to name her Alison. Fitting, to say the least.

I guess that I like Al, though. He's listened to me when I complained about our parents in the past, and was more understanding when I brushed off mother's death. He might set me up with an apartment in Cambridge until I finish law school. What will become of Nicole, though? This scenario throws more than one spoke out of my wheel.

Without knocking, Al opens my bedroom door to see me with an empty beer bottle and my tape deck humming over my worn copy of *A Trick of the Tail*. I made a mental note that if I had one song played at my funeral, it'd be "A Trick of the Tail." That song captures what I embody. When Phil sings, "The beast that can talk, more like a freak," I have this jerk in my gut as my eyes water.

"They're gone," He says. "We need to talk downstairs."

Sitting across from Al at the kitchen table, he passes me a document that reads *Last Will and Testament*. Of course he'd bring this up right after the funeral. I don't have time to sleep on it and worry. He's going to pull this band aid off before the adhesive has time to wear off with sweat.

Yet as I read the will, I have to reread a paragraph. When I look at Al, he nods to affirm. Father not only left me the house and the Porsche, his bank accounts are totally at my disposal. I am unsure how to react. Al smiles, retracting the file, and Pat raises her eyebrows with true enthusiasm.

"Aren't you pissed?" I ask.

"No!" Pat interjects.

"We knew about it," Al says. "Our father was a little more self-aware than you realize, Charles."

"But how is that fair?" I ask. "I know you're not hurting for money, but damn."

"We get the Land Rover," He says. "Everything else is yours."

I focus on the air conditioning's ambience. The room around me becomes a box as if I'm onstage and performing for an audience. This is somehow reality. I figured father never cared, and he probably didn't, but he knew it was wrong to treat me like I didn't matter. Somehow, it would make up for all his faults, because money means more than memories.

He was right. I can't magically love him, but I sure can let go of my animosity towards father. Because of this will, I'm an independent man. There's no need to go to law school or pursue a career in something I despise. Instead, I can prolong this period. My lost weekend.

"Pat," I say. "Go upstairs to father's bedroom and find a shoebox in his closet. Fill it with whatever you want. Take the Rolexes, mother's jewelry, the pistol in the sock drawer... Anything. Don't show me what's inside. Just take it."

Father might be buying me off, but Al deserves something other than a car. They had a relationship and bond that I never experienced, and Al must want a keepsake to remind him of that. When mother died, father kept everything. He withdrew from both of his sons. Al deserved something.

"So," Al says, "What're you going to do first?"

"Do all the things father wouldn't let me."

Not quite centered. The next shot gets a little closer on the right. I feel someone watching me, so I look around and see Tommy Welty waving with an assault rifle in his other hand. He starts talking, but I have my ear protection on, and I return my attention to the range. I started shooting for sport when I was sixteen to help relieve tension, because holding something I could easily turn on myself or the shooters nearby as I fire off rounds makes me forget how this world is too real. We need more fantasy to augment the horrible reality.

"They teach shootin' at Harvard?" Tommy asks as I go to leave.

"I was a member of the Sportsmen Club," I say. "I'd never leave the house with one of those."

Tommy rubs his rifle and grins. He's proud because it's a costly weapon that's bigger than everyone else's guns, but it's impractical in any domestic setting. My 9mm is for sport and protection. There's no need to aim with a machine like his, though. Point it in an intruder's direction and they'll paint your walls red.

"I might just have to use it on you if you don't call my sister."

"Surely you know about my father?" I ask.

"Yeah," He says, "I'm real sorry 'bout that. But you don't seem too broke up."

"I'll invite you both over soon," I say. "Excuse me."

Before I open the door, Tommy steps in front of me and nudges me with his rifle.

"We partying?" He asks.

"I just bought a new stereo with a CD player," I say. "So, yeah."

"You're going to need something stronger than Heineken."

Once again, I'm riding in the elevator to David the dealer's apartment, though I didn't know Tommy knew him too. When he knocks on David's door, I flashback to that Zigler guy who was here before. What a freak. I ran into some strange dealers in Cambridge, but no one tried so hard to intimidate me. The unwritten rule of buying is that if you don't have an attitude, the dealer doesn't give you one either. Even junkies have manners.

"No," David answers the door.

"What'd you mean?" Tommy asks.

"The two of you," He says. "You're trouble."

"We just wanna buy real quick."

"We need enough for a party," I say. “Like the one Nicole and I crashed.”

Tommy zips the bag into his jacket as we return to the car and I drive off to the house. Instead of trying to chat me up like he did David, he goes through my tapes in the glove compartment and pulls out Men at Work's *Business as Usual*. He doesn't mind when "Helpless Automaton" plays as he puts in the cassette, whereas I'd rewind the album to listen from start to finish. I figured he'd either be into Buck Owens or Metallica, but we're living in an interesting period of culture where MTV exposes us to more artists than ever before. I'm sure Tommy saw the "Land Down Under" video like me and probably bought the tape on a whim without hearing any other single from the band.

I'm sure there's more to Tommy than what he allows people like David to see, though I'm also certain he's not a complex intellectual. I don't point that out to besmirch him but rather to tell

myself he's a person too. Tommy isn't a character in my life's story that pops up and goes away in a week like so many girls I romanced in Cambridge. That doesn't mean he won't be a phase that'll pass, though.

As long as Nicole and I see each other, Tommy will be in the peripheral. It's better if I pick her up on the way home so he and I don't have to share the awkward moment of being in my house alone together.

Green hues enlighten my vision as my eyes force me to open them as if I'm pulling up a garage door. Sunlight's shining through the Heineken bottles on the coffee table. They're scattered around the floor as well. Tommy's humming a Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson song in his stupor. Nicole resembles a snake curled in mother's easy chair. Cocaine residue makes the hand mirror I grabbed from my parents' bathroom appear as if we recovered it from a beach.

This headache reminds me of this painting some girl I fucked at Harvard had hanging over her bed. Rosie the Riveter stood over a bleeding man with a hard on, her fist pumping in the air as he took a final breath. A railroad spike, engulfed in his temple, spread a fountain of crimson from the asshole's head. When I asked her what it was all about, she shrugged her shoulders before taking me into her mouth. Women in the eighties.

How long did this drunken drug binge last? I don't remember when I bought all of this beer, but it's more than several cases' worth. Despite the many nights I forgot in Cambridge, I always wondered why I bothered having fun if it all went black by the next afternoon. But the difference is when I see Nicole stir and unfold from her pretzel position, there's a flicker in my chest.

"What month is it?" She whimpers.

"I'm really not sure," I say. "But I'm sure we can make it to July with some more coke."

David winks at Nicole before letting us into his apartment, and thankfully he's alone. His yuppie friends put me off. Funny, I don't have the mental energy to dissect these situations anymore. I just really want more coke.

Nicole and David talk while I sit on the nearest loveseat with my mirrored sunglasses protecting me from the sun attacking us through all the huge windows. Father was considerate enough to buy heavy wooden blinds for the house. Any time I'm out in the sun, I forget there's a society that operates in the daytime.

Their talking drones around me like static from a broken TV, so I lean over to the reel to reel on the nearby table and press play. I don't care what it is. "Helpless Automaton" from the first Men at Work album makes me second guess David's taste. Though I like "Overkill" and "It's a Mistake," the band never matched their debut's consistency. Maybe it's nostalgia for all those forgotten nights, or even the ones I remember when I had to put effort into my studies.

Without my inheritance, I'm sure father would make me get a job before law school. Build character in me. I'd have to listen to myself think when I got home instead of drowning out my over analytical thoughts. Not philosophical bullshit so much as questioning why I'm following the path my family set for me rather than exploring more of myself, and why I feel different from them. Al has what father had: a stereotypically lovely wife and an angelic daughter. His reputation as an attorney hinged on father's legacy, and no one would say he hasn't lived up to that.

I want to forget that I'm a mistake. Al's fifteen years older than me, and my parent's inability to care for me as they did him, even if they'd tried, made me feel like the bits of clay a sculptor tries to push together after he broke the mold.

"How much?" I ask.

David looks across the room with his eyes cutting me for interrupting what slim chance he had at bedding Nicole with me present. I know they weren't even discussing cocaine, but I'm over this. He's an asshole and the only reason we're here is to pay him for drugs. What else is there to talk about?

"You haven't even told me how much you want," David says through his teeth.

"How much do you have, David?" I stand up and begin to walk over.

"Zigler sent me a new supply last night," He smirks. "I never carry more than a few duffle bags worth. The more I keep, the more risk I take if the DEA shows up. Which begs the question: How is it any of your fucking business?"

"Because I want all of it," I say. "And I'm willing to pay what you want."

"Well," He twiddles his thumbs, "This is America, and when you're willing to buy the lot, I'm willing to give you an American discount."

"Thank you for your patriotism."

Without pause, David walks over to a chair near his television and moves it to reveal a cut out piece of flooring. A safe lies underneath. The first thing he pulls out is a loaded revolver, which is smart to keep when you're in a room with coke crazed kids. Doesn't make me afraid of him, though. You don't need to know how to shoot if you own a .12 gauge. Point that metal stick at your target and it'll hit. With a handgun, you're not going to get it on the first shot unless you aim carefully and have a steady hand.

"Where'd you park?" David asks. "I can't have you carrying all this in the street."

"Parking garage," I say. "We'll take the elevator straight to our car."

"Smart."

Kicking the safe shut, he bolsters the duffle bags over to the coffee table and pockets the gun. Hands on his hips, David nods with a knowing smile. I didn't bring enough cash to cover this because I only wanted to shut him up, and that was the coke residue in my brain talking. I don't keep a briefcase of money with me at all times.

"$5000," David says, "But only if Nicole's willing to reimburse me for the discount."

This fucker's not pushing buttons. He's leaning on the machine's emergency lever. With a gun serving as a phallic lump in his pants and all the cocaine in Buckhead sitting in front of us, I wouldn't shame Nicole if she let him bend her over in front of me and fuck her in the ass. Part of me believes she's willing too.

"How much without the discount?" She asks.

"I'm not selling all of this," David shakes his head. "If you don't give me what I want, you're both done. Find another dealer."

Anger is a powerful sobriety agent. Piss any drunken asshole off in a bar, and he'll see straight enough to knock you out. Despite that I'm technically sober, someone on a bender is never

clean until their body expels all the toxins from within. As a certain point, we become what we consume.

I'd take a bullet to feel David's skin pierce in my teeth. If Nicole would oblige my bloodthirsty fantasy, David's corpse would be a tribute to our affair and we'd fuck over his bludgeoned body.

She squeezes my shoulder as if signifying something. Leaving me to ponder what she meant, Nicole looks over the cocaine as David opens his arms to her. Lust illuminates from her eyes. Pushing him on the couch, David grabs at her ass and she pulls the porcelain vase from the table behind the loveseat to crash onto his face.

A stupid offensive move by any means. Porcelain isn't sturdy enough to knock anyone unconscious. Mildly annoy and maybe cut them a little, sure. Nicole's all but signed our death warrant, and I'm not so fucked up that I don't react. Before David's able to groan and slap her away, pulling that gun on her as she whimpers on his floor, I'm hopping over the couch parallel to them.

He's trying to smack her away as he reaches for the gun and Nicole bites and claws at him. I would've punched her in the temple so she'd fall off and pushed all my body weight onto her torso, but he's not strategizing because she's a woman. There's still a part of him that wants to keep her pretty for when he fucks her.

It's when I head butt him and put in a right hook into his throat that he finally pushes Nicole off. I yell at her to grab his gun while I get my arms under his armpits and pull him upward. Between his cursing and spitting, Nicole fumbles into his pants for the revolver, but I'm hoping she doesn't try to use it.

"Toss it!" I manage.

Wrapping my right arm under his neck, I want to make his face turn purple until his last breath isn't a pleasurable lapse into oblivion. His death should be hard and painful. All the tension within me wants to kill this man more than any woman I fucked or cocaine I snorted. David's demise feels like my life's goal suddenly set before me in the most intense moment I stumbled into.

Nicole should be looking away or telling me to stop. Maybe she'd even claw at me like she did him to save David's life. Instead, she's looking into his eyes as David gurgles to her for help. A smile, so subtle like the Mona Lisa, interrupts everything I assumed about her. My focus is no longer my lust for this man's life to end. I want to kill him for her.

When David stops struggling and I check his temple for a pulse, I hold his once coke-snorting, whore-kissing, shit-grinning face in my arm. My mind blanks, and all the rage that begged me to murder this man sinks. Despite Nicole's reassuring embrace, and she's kissing my face as if I truly saved her life, I find no more pleasure in this. I murdered someone, and I can't undo this.

"Did you touch anything?" She asks. "I'm going to wipe down the gun and put it back in his pants."

"The reel to reel," I say.

"If you clean up the vase," She says, "I'll wipe everything we touched."

"There's no fucking way we can keep this coke," I say.

When Zigler or whoever finds David dead in his apartment, they're going to notice all that cocaine missing. While Nicole cleaned up our prints and made sure we didn't leave any trace of

ourselves, I'm certain there's a way to find out who murdered this guy. There weren't cameras in the apartment building or parking deck, surprisingly, but I'm not going to take this shit to my house. I killed someone for cocaine, and even if I'm not addicted, I have a problem. That means hiding this shit is the only way I can satisfy Nicole and keep us alive.

"Okay..." Nicole says. "You're not going to dump it, are you? Because if you throw all of this away, killing David was for nothing."

"Listen," I say, "I don't blame you for trying to hurt him, but we can't be caught with this much coke. We'll go to jail without question. If someone other than the cops finds it..."

"Bury it," Nicole says. "Remember that church?"

What I don't remember is how this dirt road left a mess on the Porsche that I had to spray off with a hose. The place isn't as creepy in the daylight, either. I don't hear or see anyone nearby. While I don't have a shovel, Nicole said we could pull up some boards from the floor. Hopefully, the coke is safe in the duffle bags.

The ground beneath the floor is barren clay, and I don't hear any rodent underneath. There's no food for them to hoard here. Nicole's sitting on a pew looking at the crooked Jesus suffering on the cross behind the pulpit. Who came here? Why did they abandon it this way? This doesn't feel like the kind of church you walk into and suddenly feel obligated not to curse or have perverted thoughts. Maybe blacks had to build this place in the middle of shitsville and worship in secret?

"I'm going to let Tommy take you home," I say. "Obviously, we're not going to tell him or anyone else."

"I don't want to go home, Charles," She says. "Let's take some of the coke and have some more fun."

"I know David was a son of a bitch," I say, "But he was still a person. We can only erase so many memories. We have to protect ourselves, Nicole, because there's someone who cares about this cocaine. They're going to want to find it."

Tommy breaks our awkward silence when we come in the house. Sitting at the kitchen table where my parents ate breakfast, he reads the back of an empty Eggo box while eating a stack of waffles, and I'm curious where he got them because I don't eat those things. He's mumbling the words and occasionally says something audible.

Now that I know him better, I can't recall him from high school, though I find him to be a likeable idiot. Some people can stop drinking or snorting drugs, clean themselves up, and put some effort into their rehabilitation to discover they possess intelligence, but Tommy doesn't read. At times, his speech reminds me of a ten year-old boy trying to read aloud in class. The cocaine amplifies his obtuse personality. He doesn't care about anything but the moment he's in, and I appreciate that.

"Take your sister home," I say. "My brother's coming over with his wife and daughter, and I have to clean up."

"That okay, Nicole?" Tommy's mouth hangs open.

"We're going to be in trouble for being gone so long anyway," She says.

There's no goodbye kiss. I let them leave without pleasantries, and I'm not sure I should see them again. Nicole and I put our lives permanently at risk's hand, and I don't want to live fearing the

person I'll no doubt piss off with David's corpse. There's always someone to turn to when I need help, but I have to figure this out as an adult. Telling Al might implicate him somehow. The only way to keep a secret is to never tell anyone, because once it leaves your mouth, the person you trust is liable to break that bond. With money and drugs, cutting out your tongue is the best option.

I should consider any witnesses outside the building. There wasn't anyone on the elevator or in the parking deck, but someone might notice a black Porsche showing up and leaving at a certain time. Someone my age doesn't belong in Buckhead, so it's not unlikely someone would remember two young people hopping around in a fancy car. A guy like David has a reputation that anyone might associate with strangers coming and going.

We could've staged a suicide, or taken the body with us somehow. Instead, we left the number one piece of evidence and relied on chance. Staying in Atlanta seems like watching a boiling pot of water boil over without turning down the stove. Not only stupid, but hazardous.

I don't want to buy a cheap used car and go across the country, or fly to Mexico or Canada. Remaining within a thousand mile radius isn't going to fend any threats away. Nicole's not going to go for fleeing like vagabonds, either.

Low and distorted. I walk down the stairwell of my dorm and the sound seems to come from above and below. Someone's tape speeds up and the riff to "Land of Confusion" finally plays in tune. Going outside, the song plays like a bad PA system in a gym. Through fog, I see figures coming toward me. One of them lights a cigarette and they stop as the light haired one takes a drag, while the tip illuminates through the mist.

"Price," Zigler says. "I'll see your soul in Hell."

The second figures clasps onto Zigler's shoulder and pulls him into the air before launching the drug kingpin at my feet. I fall on my ass as the goateed man comes to us with his blood red eyes dancing like boiling pools. My vocal cords can't vibrate.

My face hits the carpet in my bedroom. There's no music back in reality. Feet underneath me trudge down to the kitchen and I look at my empty house. Why should I stay here when I have all this money? I can buy a train ticket and go to Los Angeles. Selling this place and finding a new home might work best. When Zigler discovers who murdered his dealer and ran off with all that coke, he'll come here first.

Al can help me. He dealt with Zigler's brother. Should I tell him about the stash, though? I should go back to the church and move it somewhere else because even Nicole knowing is dangerous. I could just toss it over a bridge. There's no solution in a coke thirsty brain, though.

"So, do I need to pay you for attorney-client confidentiality?"

"Charles," Al pauses. "If you want privacy, you can't talk on the phone. Come over."

Pat opens the front door and lets me in with only a cocked eyebrow. Returning to the living room, Pat continues in her existence where she forgets about me. Al motions me into his study and locks his door.

"What's going on?"

"You prosecuted someone named Zigler, right?"

"Umm. Emile Zigler. But he's still in jail."

"Well, I'm a new acquaintance of his brother, Jonathan."

"Charles," Al leans back in his chair. "Why? I mean, I know why. You're a young millionaire, a Harvard graduate, and hopefully going back for law school this fall, but... This shit isn't pixie dust. It's dangerous shit. What'd you do to piss off Zigler?"

"He doesn't know it was me yet."

Do I tell my brother that I murdered a drug dealer? He might turn me in. Implicating himself might make him a target. He has Pat and Alison to consider. Our blood isn't thicker than water because of the fifteen years between us. Al sees me as another thing in his life to deal with.

"Nicole and I were trying to make this big score. This guy who deals for Zigler came onto her and they got into a fight."

"Oh boy. I bet he's decomposing as we speak."

"I don't know if the body is still there," I say. "Zigler's going to walk in on a dead body and a lot of missing cocaine, though."

"Did you keep it?"

"Stashed it somewhere."

"I don't wanna know where, but I suggest if Nicole knows about it, you stay clear. Don't go back for it."

For once my mind clears and I'm able to look at the floor without thinking. I want to embrace this nothingness for a while. All the beer and coke erased life as if I slept for weeks and just now woke up.

"Charles, you're in the clear unless she talks, or someone spotted you."

"There wasn't anyone else there."

"What'd you do after you guys hid the coke?"

"I came home, and her brother was still there. They left together."

"Why he was there?"

"He partied with us. He even went with me to buy coke once."

Al rolls his eyes back and scratches the stubble on his cheek. I suppose Tommy is a loose end here, and I don't know Nicole well enough to trust her to keep a secret. Our little trinity is a lit match over the Acme TNT factory.

"Well, all you can do is wait," Al says. "Don't see Nicole for a while. Maybe get out of town. Go to the beach or something."

"And if Zigler finds out?"

"Invest your money in Canada."

On the way home, I buy a bottle of Riesling at Walkers Grocery and stop by McDonalds for a couple of Big Macs. If I can pig out and drink until I pass out, then I might wake up with a decision: to leave or stay. Does Nicole mean enough for me to stick around? Surely she won't fall in love with some other rich coke head while I'm away. I'd like to leave and spend time on my own, yet she's going to be on my mind the whole time. What do I like about her so much? There're billions of women in this world, and I have to be addicted to her.

When I pull into the garage, I hear something move behind me. Nicole's standing behind the car biting her lip and rubbing her nails against the Porsche. Tommy's probably here.

"How'd you get here?" I ask.

"Taxi," She says. "I had Tommy drop me off at the mall and I called one with a payphone. Something's not right, Charles."

I reach behind me to close the garage door.

"Something's definitely fucked," I say.

"What are we going to do?"

"I'll pack a bag, and you can buy new clothes. We can go right now."

"But where?"

"Miami. Mexico. Los Angeles. New York. Wherever the hell we want to."

"Let's just get a room in Destin," Nicole puts her arms around me. "It's not too far if we need to come back, but no one's going to look for us there. We can get there in six hours."

"Get in the car," I say. "There's a burger for you if you want it."

Upstairs, I throw some outfits into a duffel bag along with father's revolver. From my nightstand, I nab all of my favorite cassettes: *Abacab*, *Business as Usual*, *Speaking in Tongues*, *Life's Rich*

Pageant, and *Rain Dogs*. In the kitchen, I toss in some Lays and Diet Cokes for the road. I don't want us to stop unless our bladders threaten the Porsche's interior.

"You ready?" I get in the car.

"No," Nicole says, "But I wasn't ready for any of this."

When I lay down in our hotel bed, my eyes close but I still see the headlights and yellow lines beneath me. The air conditioning, engine, and wind create an ambient tune that bring enough anxiety to keep me awake. Nicole slept for most of the trip once we got out of Atlanta. I'm under the blanket with a beautiful girl and I'm wondering where the closest gas station is. A Porsche in Florida shouldn't be a big deal, right?

The trip was a mix of me reaching for a new cassette and bitching at myself for not investing in a CD player for the car. Tapes are fine in a dorm room or on a Walkman late at night to drown out your parents fucking, but their audio quality is on par with a 78 played on a turntable with a cone speaker. Leave them in the car during the summer and Freddie Mercury sounds like Greg Allman.

I stopped for gas in Montgomery where they sold boiled peanuts out of a hut. I saw a sign for the Hank Williams museum and realized I forgot about him. Would a Harvard grad brag about listening to Country music after *Urban Cowboy*? The Porsche was able to make it here on one fill up, but by the skin of my dead father's teeth.

Like diva vampires, we sleep with the curtains blocking out a beach sunrise. The traffic fades from my mind and I'm falling backwards as I lie still. When I wake up, I'll continue to ignore my problems.

Al sits in his study encircling a wet glass with his fingertips. My eyes try to find the cigar, but there's nothing but papers and a bottle of Hennessy on his desk. I smell the same smoke father blew in my face countless times. I turn to see a dark face behind fresh fumes. Al says something about our Lord. The room turns black. Even the windows reflect the darkness.

You're prime. Like your brother. Will you bear us a son, Charles?

Nicole turns the TV on. I look at the alarm clock to see that it's one in the afternoon. Phil Collins's video for "Take Me Home" plays on mute. When I put my hand on Nicole's arm, she's cold and her bone meets mine. The cocaine made our asses bleed.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

She should be. If we're going to be vacationing and hiding out, rehabilitating ourselves should be key. A cocaine addiction might drive us to finding a new David to kill, and I'm not interesting in running once we settle in.

"Do you want breakfast or lunch?" I ask.

Nicole shrugs while Phil Collins points at the Hollywood sign. What's the point of a music video without music? Cradling her chin, I kiss her face and brush back her hair.

"If you tell me what you want to eat, we'll go to the beach."

"I don't have any clothes. Or sun block."

"We'll buy you everything you need."

After stopping at a BP, we head down the main drag past the shopping center, which makes Nicole looks out the window like a poodle longing to drop a deuce, and end up at Whataburger. I admit eating at a new fast food place excites me like I'm cheating on Ronald McDonald in a broom

closet during a fund raising banquet for childhood cancer. When I discover the spicy ketchup, I almost forget Nicole's nibbling on fries without salt. I refill my Diet Coke before we leave to buy Nicole some clothes. With my shades down, I hand her my wallet and lean back in the car.

Staring at the roof, my daydreams return to the nightmares I keep having. Am I seeing the Devil in my sleep? I can't see his face because the brain can't form new people. However, I remember a dream I had in the fourth grade about a brunette with a slender gap in her front teeth. She kissed me and said she was my girlfriend, but I'd never met her before. The next morning, a new girl showed up at school, and it was the same girl from the dream.

Am I some perverse hopeless romantic? I'm a murderer for love. How many more would I kill for her? If she brought me a stranger and set him on the pavement, would I back the Porsche over his skull? This has to be because of the drugs. Mixing cocaine and alcohol flushed out our sense of responsibility and morality.

Nicole pats the passenger window and points back at the trunk. Digging my heel under the switch, she pulls open the hood and tosses several bags in. I wonder if she's dropping off what she can't carry so she can shop more?

"You buy a swim suit?" I ask.

"Oh shit," She says. "Let me go get a two piece. Do you need trunks?"

"I packed some."

Why didn't I pack the Walkman for the beach? I keep reading about portable CD players in Japan, which would be a sound investment despite buying my first CD capable stereo recently. Imagine the sand getting in an LP's grooves if I hauled a turntable to the ocean.

Nicole's ribcage distracts me from the bikini with a thong strap she bought. After I help her with the sun block, she stumbles through the sand and stops at the water. Her legs buckle when the cold ocean hits and I hear a squeal.

Without a book or music, I'm stuck staring at the horizon. Most beach trips are the result of months of planning. My parents booked a condo for a week and they had drinks under an umbrella. They wouldn't sit on towels or bother going in the water. For them, a vacation meant getting a mild tan and letting their son see if he could drown himself. They had me too late to see me as anything but a hazard to their retirement.

I saw a mature, intelligent yet eager soul in Nicole. How much of that was cocaine? She had a regular dealer and knows Zigler, so she must've been on it the night we met. The incident in David's bathroom certainly means she's fucked other guys while barely knowing them. I'm not special to her, am I? But I don't want to say it's just my wallet she likes. How could anyone appreciate someone so spoiled and dense like Charles Price? She's gotta be the same in some way. Her brother is who I would be if I didn't have a brain, after all. Tommy should've gone down the same hole as David. Fucking nuisance.

A Cuban looking guy in a Speedo is standing near me, and he's definitely looking at my girlfriend. This guy's nose looks like it could snort an entire block of uncut coke.

"Her name is Sarah," I say.

"Oh," He laughs. "Sorry, man."

Yet he walks toward her as Nicole lets the salty solution ride up to her knees. He even gets in the water and splashes it around with his fat hands. As he's calling out to her, I'm getting up with my keys in hand, because his buddies might be lurking for a way into the Porsche.

"That your boyfriend?" He points at me.

"My husband," Nicole wraps her arms around my waist.

"Nah," He says. "That ain't what I heard."

"Heard?"

Mr. Aztec nose dives into water, which is my cue to take Nicole by the arm and get us back to the hotel room. Is it possible Zigler knows we're here? David's body could still be in that high rise. It's been a day. That Cuban is probably a con man or something.

Nicole's barking at me for handling her like this, and I don't care that she's getting the leather seat sandy and wet. If we have to go to fucking Mexico, we will. I'm probably being paranoid, but I'm over taking risks.

"He was just talking," Nicole says.

"We're going back to the room."

"Why don't you just drive me back to Atlanta, Charles?"

"Why don't I just dump your corpse in the ocean, because that's what'll happen if Zigler finds us here! You decided to get us involved with David. Now we're fucked. See the correlation you cum guzzling bitch?"

Nicole doesn't deserve to be saved if she's unappreciative. That indicates she'll repeat her mistakes until we're dead, and I can't let her destroy our lives more. If I drive us all the way back to Atlanta, she's going to talk. I'd rather leave her here and drive to Miami. With her looks, she can find a new dumbass and coke dealer to murder before I hit the interstate.

"How the fuck can you say that to me?"

"Because you're reckless," I say. "Don't talk to anybody unless you have to. Don't tell anyone where we're from. Don't even tell someone your favorite food. We're running from dangerous men."

"Well, you're right, but why are you such an asshole about it?"

When I consider calling her a cum guzzling bitch might be over the line, I laugh. Nicole smirks and punches me in the shoulder. If she doesn't look over my shoulder, I might be the one kidnapped by a big nosed stranger. Abandoning her would mean we did this for nothing.

"We just have to be careful," I say.

"What do you want to do?"

Maybe Destin is too glamorous for us? A couple of kids like us will always go to the sunnier side. A Porsche will stick out too, but it's the only car we have. Al has contacts and puts men like Zigler in prison. If I can talk to him, then I'll know where to go next.

Back in the room, Nicole undoes her bathing suit and lays on the unmade bed nude. I want to bite her ass and eat that pussy from behind, but her distractions lead me nowhere. We might as well fuck soon, though. It would help relieve our tension toward each other.

Al should be coming home from the office now. Pat answers and I ask to speak to him without giving my name and tell her to put him on fast. If Al hasn't heard anything, we're fine for another day or so.

"Any news?" I ask.

"Uh, yeah," Al lowers his voice. "His maid found him. Our mutual friend probably found out before I did."

"I guess it's a long shot for you to hear anything from him?"

"Not entirely. He speaks to his brother on the phone every day."

"Do you have access to the phone records?"

"No, but I get alerted every time they talk. They spoke shortly before I heard the news."

Zigler confides in his brother? Maybe asks for advice. This means he doesn't have instincts about us. How many clients did David see in a day? Did he keep a record of all transactions? Maybe he had a diary? From our brief exchange with Zigler, I know he's aware of Nicole and David sharing some sort of relationship.

"A guy like him," I say, "How far do you think his reach is?"

"His supply comes from the islands. They come up through Miami. I'd say he's there every other week."

"Is this his week?"

"No. Losing a man like this... He's going to be making arrangements and cutting his dealers short because he'll starve the city until he finds... whoever did it."

After hanging up, I feel the anticipation to leave. If Zigler's power ranges from Cuba to Atlanta, then Florida was a shitty detour. Beyond that, we need a distraction in case any of Zigler's eyes spots the two drugged out kids with a Porsche. I seriously need to figure that part out, because a Porsche is a moving target.

If we go by plane, I could drive us to Birmingham, park the car in the garage for an extended period, and maybe rent a car wherever we end up. We can't stay in a rural area because country folk talk. It has to be another dense city out of Zigler's range. Hell, it might as well be New Orleans. Someone can get lost there and there're a different breed.

"Call Tommy," I say. "Tell him you're in Savannah with me."

"Okay. Why do you want me to lie to my brother? He's not involved."

"Have you ever heard the phrase *I heard it through the grapevine*?"

Nicole's lying to her beloved dumbass brother as I grab our bags and head out to the car. I'm careful to see if anyone notices me moving out, and everyone's more interested in the pavement or their conversations. If Atlanta is hell and Miami is heaven, Destin is purgatory. The day I hang myself, an illegal immigrant will find me in a hotel bathroom with a small mountain of cocaine and they'll put my name on the Welcome to Destin sign to honor the person who finally made something interesting happen.

I wish we had some Xanex or something to put Nicole to sleep, because she keeps asking questions while I head to Birmingham. Yes, there are closer airports. No, we're not stopping for dinner. If I let you have a Coke now, you'll have to stop again to pee later. This girl has daddy issues coming out of her asshole. Maybe I should find a coke dealer in NOLA and blow it up her butt?

When she turns on the radio, "Back Chat" by Queen starts as a deep voiced DJ talks about how he misses the days of "Fat Bottomed Girls." If there was ever a band that should've taken a break after 1980, it's Queen. Such a talented group of musicians with no aptitude for what's quality Rock in the new decade. Then again, *Jazz* and *The Game* had plenty of clunkers. I guess if you make *News of the World*, you wonder where to go when you've already peaked.

"Why do they never play The Cure around here?" Nicole asks.

"What are you on about?"

"Robert Smith is so amazing. Didn't you hear *The Head on the Door*?"

"Are you trying to have a conversation with me?"

"You don't like the Cure?"

"Were you on coke the night we met?"

"We both were, right?"

There's an unsurprising revelation. I'm on the run with someone I thought was truly into me and somehow intellectually on par with me too. If she thinks a conversation about a Gothic Pop band is stimulating, then I should reevaluate all of this.

"I guess *Pornography* was good," I say. "I dated a girl from Boston who liked to fuck with it on."

"You fucked other girls before me?" Nicole bites my shoulder. "Was she any good?"

"I got distracted by the music."

"What would you prefer to fuck to?"

"I guess either 'Yellow Submarine' or the theme to Benny Hill."

"Shut up, Charles."

I guess I prefer the Cure to Mr. Mister or REO Speedwagon. We've already exhausted the tapes I brought. I had to stop Nicole from tossing Men at Work out the window.

After I park the Porsche in the concrete garage, I look at the airport and consider that I brought a revolver with me. If I leave it in the car, I won't have access to a firearm in Louisiana. That might be positive because I don't want to shoot anyone, but I might have to. I have enough money to buy one, but would I just leave it in NOLA? Maybe we could fly there, I can get a gun, and we'll rent a car to drive back to Birmingham. I sure as hell don't want to drive all the way there from Alabama.

I toss the revolver in the trunk and grab our bags. There's no danger here, so I'm not going to need protection until we get there. Maybe we'll get enough rest on the plane to have a fun time, but it's only an hour long flight. Beats the hell out of six hour long drive.

We stare straight ahead for the flight. There's nothing to say.

We're in our fourth hotel since we arrived in NOLA. To give the impression we're a vacationing couple, we don't spend more than a few days in a room. We leave the Do Not Disturb sign on our door and only eat fast food, and I pay only in cash. If I need an ATM, I go alone so no one sees me with Nicole, and I use a new one each time.

Nicole's bleached hair is fading into a dirty blonde. We've watched the same music videos on MTV so much that we're excited to watch the local news. I'd like to find a bookstore, but I'm not sure who might spot me. I need to call Al, but I don't want to hear that Zigler's after us. I never go to the doctor unless I'm sick because I don't like bad news.

While we our bodies detox, Nicole's taken to reading the Gideon Bible with her head upside down on the bed, and I try to do more pushups and crunches each day. In my dorm room, I could do three hundred each, and my arms give out after fifty now. My face looks a little pudgier while my eyes seem to sink in as if someone's frightened me to death.

I'm not sure cocaine was the problem. Our tendency to abuse it and let it control our actions makes me think we could find that bag we stole from David and do it little by little. A few bumps would fix this pit we're stuck in like opposing magnets. Someone in NOLA has it, and that frightens me because we both want some.

Al knows I would fuck up. The difference in our childhood is he had parents. I went to Harvard like him, yet when he came home, Al didn't pick up a drug habit and a girlfriend. He met Pat at school, and they kept their relationship together through letters and late phone calls. A true romance. I met Nicole in a club and never let our relationship breath. Al knows I'm a fuck up because he's able to watch me, and I've never taken the time to look back. Our hearts don't beat at the same pace.

"Charles?" Pat says. "Where've you been?"

"I'm in Savannah," I say. "Just needed to get away. Is Al in?"

"Sure. Hold on."

Al was a senior at Harvard when he brought Pat home for Christmas break. I was almost seven, and most seven-year-olds possess such little understanding of human feeling that they ask questions without realizing they may not get an answer but rather a slap in the face. Because words can carry weight greater than a hand, society weighs a simple strike as admissible when someone hurts your feelings. What's worse than words? Our eyes and silence.

I learned the harm in being quiet during dinner when I would ask my mother a question and she kept swirling noodles around her fork. If I asked it again, she didn't tell me to shut up. My father's eyes threatened me. With that look, I might get a spanking or sent to my room before I could finish.

When I was almost seven, Al spent most of my life at Harvard. He didn't finish school until he graduated from Harvard Law when I was ten. Then I had to sit through his wedding, listen to him move his things into a house father helped him finance, and by the time I was twelve, I realized I didn't have a brother. We merely shared the same blood.

Pat walked through our front door as a new stranger in my home. After mother gave her a hug and father kissed her hand, she looked down at Al's kid brother and saw the first unwelcome face since they got off the plane. The best way to tell someone how you feel with your eyes is to

scream in your mind. She was taking away my brother, and my parents gave her more attention in ten seconds than I got in a week.

"Savannah?" Al says.

"I'm not calling about where I am," I say. "Have you heard anything?"

"Charles, there's been a change. A major one."

"Yeah?"

"I'm closing the firm. I have a new job."

"That's great, but I need to know if it's safe to come back."

"Well, I have protection. And you and my new client share a mutual interest in Jonathan Zigler."

"Why?"

"Because the cocaine business isn't doing the job. It's a rich man's drug, and that isolates a lot of people."

"Al," I say, "Stop. Is Zigler looking for me?"

"He's making the rounds around Atlanta, and he's going to see you're missing and know you're running. The best thing you could've done was stick around, Charles."

"Then I have to stay gone."

"If you come back to town, drop off your girlfriend, and come see me."

I could've stayed in Birmingham. Why'd I decide to come to New Orleans only to stay in hotel rooms the whole time? I sat on the beach for less than five minutes before I dragged us out of Destin. I was paranoid about some stranger checking out Nicole, and my absence burned like a cigarette butt in a trash can full of gasoline. All Zigler needs to do is open the right door when he smells the smoke.

Tonight, I'll come up with a pizza and a six pack of Coke. I'll lie to Nicole that we're in the clear, and drop her off at home tomorrow. She'll be too relieved to notice I'm gone. At least for a few days. Whatever Al has planned, I don't have any other option. I have the money to run, but not the will.

Carrying the Cokes on top of the Dominos box, I lean against the wall to balance myself and unlock the door. Nicole looks around and there's a black girl standing with her at the table. She knows that letting a stranger in could mean our death, and the white powder on their nostrils tells me why this party started.

"Oh hey," The black girl says. "I'm Gina. I'm in the room across the hall."

"I needed ice," Nicole says.

"Hey there," I say.

Freaking out raises suspicion, but now I know we have to leave tonight. Preferably without Gina's knowledge.

"You want some?" Gina offers.

"I'm actually pretty hungry," I say. "You're welcome to some of this."

"Nah," She says. "My man is taking me out in a few."

"Oh," I say, "Well we'll be here until Monday if you wanna hang."

"Sure, yeah. Where you guys from?"

"Little Rock."

When Gina's out, I turn around to Nicole eating a slice and washing it down as soon as she takes a bite. I've never paid attention to her eat. She's so impatient and erratic that she can't chew her food. I can leave her here, and she'll call her brother, and her parents will wire her money or buy her a plane ticket. I should.

And I don't want to talk or fight. If Zigler showed up with a bump, she'd suck his dick. She might be a decent person outside of her addiction, but I can't fight the drugs for her. If she was off coke this long and let Gina in the room, then Nicole's been the danger and I'm her enabler.

Looking out the peephole, I see Gina's boyfriend show up and enter the room across the hall. His limp and patchy beard betrays him as an unremarkable common man. When I grab our bags, I look again to make sure they're not coming out just yet. Then I go a few yards down the hall to the stairwell and hide our stuff behind the bottom set. I'll call a cab when I come back for Nicole.

"You didn't eat yet," Nicole says.

"I will after I call us a ride," I say. "We're going home tonight."

"You called Al?"

"He says Zigler's not looking for us. You'll be back with your family in a few hours."

"Then what?"

"We'll see."

"Are you going to break up with me?"

"Why would I?" I ask.

"Are you?"

I avoid the question when the cab company answers. Nicole's dug us a hole, and I want out before I'm in too deep to crawl out. When I let her out of the car, I'm better off never picking her up again.

We're waiting on the sidewalk with our bags for only a minute when the taxi pulls up. We toss the bags in the seats with us and I tell the driver to get us to the airport. Hopefully, the Porsche still sits in the garage unmolested.

I'm hungry by the time we're back in the car and I smell the familiar leather interior. When I spend a long time away from home, the first thing I notice is how everything smells. The car is the same, yet different because I wasn't here with it. Turning over the engine and seeing the headlights glare against the concrete wall makes me want to drive back to Florida to give Nicole the beach scene she deserved.

"Next time we go somewhere," Nicole says, "Let's have fun. I felt like I was your captive for two weeks."

"If you're beauty, I guess that makes me the beast."

When Nicole bends to kiss me, I'm taken aback. We haven't kissed since last week. She brushes her hand against my cheek, and we linger before the silence grows intense and I put the car in gear. She's making leaving her a lot harder.

"Can I stay with you?" She asks.

"My brother wants to see me," I say. "I'll call your place afterward."

When I hit Atlanta and drop Nicole off, I head to Al's house for some clarity. He indicated he was safe from Zigler, and maybe he cut a deal to protect his family. That might include selling me out. I'm not confident in him, but he's my brother, and I don't believe Al is a man without integrity. Rather than dealing with this issue, I'd rather be at home in a bath and change into fresh clothes that weren't cleaned at a machine that takes quarters.

Al looks at me through the front window, and then lingers at the Porsche in the driveway. After disappearing back into the house, I hear the garage door open and Al snaps his fingers for me to park the car inside. Mother's Land Rover sits in the other spot, so I guess Pat and Alison aren't home.

"Come inside," He says. "I gotta make a call. Did you sleep at all these past few weeks?"

"My body did," I say. "I haven't had a drink or bump since you last saw me."

"Do you think the drinking is a problem, because you'll want a couple before we head out."

"Head out?"

Without asking, Al turns on the TV and thumbs up the volume before pouring me a double Grey Goose over ice. He knows a little vodka helps even if you're trying to get clean. The dry flavor feels so good in my mouth I want to drink the whole bottle and die.

I can't hear what Al's saying in the other room over The Price is Right. Am I going to meet the Godfather? He has his ear to the ground for crime in Atlanta, so Al must have those connections.

"You ready?" He asks. "We're taking the Land Rover."

"Are you going to explain on the way?"

"I can't."

"Why the hell would I want to go, then?"

"Charles, this new client of mine is higher on the totem pole than Zigler. If you meet him and secure a position for yourself, you'll be set like me."

How can I control my life and future if people keep kicking me off any path I try to take on my own? Father wanted me to go to Harvard and become a lawyer. Nicole introduced me to David and Zigler. Al wants me to meet his boss and secure a job for me after I finish Harvard Law. At no point has anyone thought to ask what I want.

I assume Al is taking me to a secluded cabin in the woods where attack dogs on thick chains and men with shotguns on their shoulders will greet us. We don't turn on a dirt road and watch trees swarm around us. There's a warehouse in East Point near College Park, and there's a fence with barbed wire, but no intense security. A man at the gate opens the door for us, waves at Al, and we head to an open garage.

There're tall machines with blinking green and red lights lined in rows with wires connecting all of them. At the far end of the warehouse is a screen about fifty-five inches wide. A man clicks a mouse which makes me realize this is a huge computer.

"Mr. Groaan," Al says. "I'd like to introduce you to my brother, Charles."

At first glance, you'd think Groaan was a fat middle-aged man. His distinct nose and sharp chin under round glasses gives the impression of someone from a bygone era. With shoulders that

broad and a handshake firm enough to dissolve my fingers, this humble looking man wears a permanent disguise.

"Charles," He says, "Your brother is too formal. It's Walter."

"Walter," I nod.

"You've never seen a server room, have you?"

"Is that what this is?"

"Yes, and we're going to have a lot more in Korea pretty soon. I just bought a decent property near Kim Il-Sung's palace."

Last year in '85, Reagan declared war on Korea, and a few months later he declared Korea U.S. territory. I would think Reagan would possess more decorum, but he boasted about how one of our own broke into Kim Il-Sung's palace and decapitated the old dictator.

"What's all of this for?" I ask.

"Charles, do you know how telephones work? Someone actually thought we could connect everyone in the world with a little wire and a handheld device. Now we have cell phones that connect to towers being built as we speak. In twenty years, everyone will have a cell phone. But what about computers?"

Al looks at me with a smirk like we just met God and He's laid out the meaning of life. Groaan sits back at the computer and pulls up a window where he types the text: *Hello, Mr. Denver. Do we have any servers in operation in our Korean territory yet?* Computers are glorified typewriters. The screens put up ugly green text, and they take up too much space.

A chirping sound proceeds new green text that Groaan doesn't type, though: *Our first server room is currently operational, Mr. Groaan*. I don't know if he's actually talking to someone in Korea, but he could've just called and asked.

"Before cell phones become more than a rich man's vanity, we're going to have computers in class rooms and most American homes. People will meet and talk to each other from across the globe. By that time, your brother, Al, will be a millionaire."

"What does this have to do with me?" I turn to Al.

"Charles," Groaan says, "It's bigger than you. Jonathan Zigler is the old guard. I'm the new."

"What do cocaine and computers have in common?"

"Computers are more efficient at brainwashing and controlling humans. We invested in cocaine because we believed it would influence the rich to destroy America's economic infrastructure. Instead, it's made this country expand and become the drug of yuppies."

"Are you saying you invented cocaine?"

"No, but my master did."

So Al's working for a coked up nerd. I wasn't totally discounting his computer theory until he claimed to work for the mastermind behind cocaine. He might as well say he invented the question mark.

"Who's your master?" I ask.

"I'm a dramatic fool," Groaan says. "My primary investor. Anyway, I speak on his behalf as this is our company."

"Al," I turn to my brother.

"Let's drop the charade," Groaan says.

My brother exhales smoke, and his feet seem to be on fire as fumes rise from his shoes to veil his body. My pulse seems to stop and start like an engine that won't turn over as I watch Al disappear in a cloud.

"Your brother and his family are safe," Groaan says. "They're going to assume you took their SUV when they see the Porsche parked in their garage."

"Where are they?"

"Out shopping. You haven't spoken to your brother at all since you left Atlanta. You've been talking to us."

"Zigler?" I ask.

"You're so hung up on Zigler and yet you never questioned your dreams."

Each night, it seems I see the same dark figure in my house or dorm room. I've grown so used to seeing him, I don't think about it anymore. Dreams are meaningless, but Groaan knows about my nightmares. I thought it was the coke and alcohol.

"I've got a company to build, Charles. I can't risk my potential reputation by shooting up the streets of Atlanta. For some reason, my master chose you to help."

"Help shoot up the streets of Atlanta?"

"Something akin to that. We really need someone to take down Zigler. He's signed a deal with us, and if I intervene, I'll break the contract. You've shown a willingness to kill, and you've got an in."

"You want me to kill Zigler?"

"Eventually," Groaan says. "But you've got to dismantle his market. Take out all of his dealers, and then you can kill him."

"I'm not bulletproof," I say.

"No, but you're creative. A Harvard man. You're well trained in firearms, but your mind is most valuable because you were able to get off the coke and think rationally. Zigler already sees you as a threat."

"Zigler knows I killed David?"

"Yes," Groaan says. "And he's taking your girlfriend as we speak."

"What do you mean? How do you know that?"

"It gives you more incentive to help us."

I'm over this, but I needed to keep Nicole out of my life. If I show up at her house, and she's perfectly fine, Zigler might be watching. That's a paranoid thought, but more comforting than her being gone.

Running away from the machines to the Land Rover, I try to make this less dramatic than it seems. I look at Walter Groaan from across the room, and I know he's not going to let me live knowing what I do. I have to play his game, because whoever his master is, he's bigger than all of us.

Once I'm in Nicole's neighborhood, I find a vacant spot in someone's driveway. If someone's monitoring her house, they'll expect to see a Porsche pull up. The only issue is that I need to keep from being recognized. There's a pullover hoodie in the backseat that smells like Pat's perfume. It's a little short, but it's good enough.

Walking on the opposite side of the street, I don't spot anyone outside. No suspicious van or black sedan. When I get to house adjacent from Nicole's place, I see her parents' car is in the drive. Since no one's around, I cross over and go to their neighbor's plot.

Climbing over the fence, I pull myself into Nicole's backyard and look in the rear windows of the living room. The TV's on, but no one's watching. When I try the backdoor, the handle's not locked. I wipe my fingerprints off with my sleeve, and I bury my hands in my armpits to keep them off anything else. No one's on the first floor, so I'll make the horror movie mistake of going upstairs. If only I had a gun.

First door is a bathroom. Who has a bathroom this close to the stairwell? A linens closet. Nicole's room is empty. Next is a game room with a pool table. Tommy's room is empty, which leaves one room I haven't looked at.

Like a noisy child, I bend down to the bottom of the door and see it's dark in there. Not even natural light from a window. Putting my ear to the crack, I don't hear breathing or talking. When I open this door, there could just be a dark room with no one inside. But if Nicole's parent's car is here, then they must be somewhere in the house. I didn't check for a basement. But I'm at this door now, and I have to check before I look anywhere else.

Light from the hallway outlines my shadow. On the ground, Tommy lies on his stomach without moving. Without reaching for a switch, I walk into the darkness and see two people in the bed. They're assumedly Nicole's parents. I lean over the man and he's not breathing. Kneeling down to Tommy, I listen and it's confirmed. The only person missing is Nicole, and she could be under the bed or in the closet.

There's no blood, which makes me wonder if they were strangled or poisoned. It must've taken at least two men to take down Tommy, and Nicole's dad isn't a little guy either. I didn't see any signs of breaking and entering downstairs, so they either came in through the unlocked backdoor like me, or they were let inside. The neighbors would've heard a struggle like this, though. Nicole would've screamed. How did they contain this?

Closing the door back, I see David's body in my head. When I killed him, I wondered if I actually finished him. I expected him to move and breathe like Nicole's family. Freaking out wouldn't do me much good right now, because there might be someone left in the house. Now how the hell should I get out of here unnoticed?

There are three more people dead because of me. It's not just Nicole, because I had a decision to make too. I could've left Nicole at the apartment with David. It would mean I didn't have to run, and these people would still be alive.

Out the backdoor and through the neighbor's yard, I make sure the street's still empty when I walk out. I'd like to breakdown and scream into a pillow right now, but I knew the reality before I came here. Zigler's got the girl, and I'm fucked until I kill him and get her back.

I park the Land Rover at the parking deck outside Al's law firm and take a taxi to a house down the street from mine. When I don't suspect anyone's around, I go to the backdoor to come inside. Zigler might know where Nicole lived, but the only way he'll figure I'm here is if Nicole tells him. He isn't here now, so I should be safe for now. Staying here doesn't make sense, though. I'll leave the Porsche at Al's place until this is over.

Since my bag and the revolver are still in the car, I find my mother's leather overnight bag and pack my underwear, a couple of shirts, and a pair of jeans. I'll have to buy new toiletries and a few low key outfits, and whatever I buy will have to be in cash.

I don't know how to get back in contact with Groaan, but if he knows about my dreams, I'm sure he'll reach out to me. Until I know when to make the first move, I'm staying out of town at the first semi-comfortable motel I find.

I would leave through the garage, but it's a mistake to leave your garage door open. Someone can walk in, close the door, and break in through the kitchen door without anyone hearing them break the glass. They could even park their car in there for an easy escape once they're through. Most break-ins happen swiftly and in the daylight, though.

When I come out front, there's a black Cadillac with the engine running waiting for me. The rear passenger window rolls down to reveal Walter Groaan's face. This should be an interesting conversation, because I'm not going to love doing his dirty work if Nicole's life is at stake.

"Come on," He says. "Wouldn't make sense for you to work for me and live like a peasant."

"How'd you know?"

"You're not going to sleep here, are you? You have a bag packed. Your gun is at your brother's house. You're smart enough not to stay as the Westin."

"Where're we going?"

"I have a guest room," He opens the door. "It'll make this easier."

I get in, and the driver looks at me through the mirror. When I buckle up, he puts the car in drive. As if this couldn't be more peculiar, Groaan's got Dudley Do-Right driving his Caddie. The electric window between the driver and us goes up before Groaan starts his talking.

"Zigler's not going to hurt your girlfriend," He says. "He got his point across by killing her family. Now you're the only one she has. The good news is that she'll finally detox before you see her again."

"How do you know he won't hurt her?" I ask. "He'll at least tie her up in some dank basement."

"Zigler and I have the same master. That's how I know. But Zigler doesn't know about me. He's being kept ignorant until you take him out."

"Why get rid of him when he's got so much power?"

"Cocaine isn't making the progress we hoped. It's like investing in land and not building anything. Zigler's got a lot of territory, but it's not changing the world like we'd hoped. Not as rapidly, anyway. If we're going to play the long con, computers make more sense. You can stop snorting coke, but everyone will need a computer one day."

"Why not just do both?"

"Zigler's getting too dangerous. Snorting too much of the Devil's dust. He was warned against his ego, and now his dealers are following suit."

"And your plan is for me to take out his dealers? Why not his suppliers too?"

"You're not capable of taking on Cuba," Walter says.

"Who are his suppliers? Is there a factory with a bunch of sweaty workers making cocaine? It's gotta be just a few guys, right?"

"Very dangerous guys. I'm already betting against you with the dealers."

"Is there a rule that I need to do this alone?"

"Involving others is too risky."

"But what if they don't know why we're doing it?" I ask. "I can get one man to help me take out all of the suppliers, and then I'll do the dealers."

"Alright, tell me your plan, Charles."

"Do you know of the guy who ended the Korean War this year?"

"Arthur Lindsay," Walter nods. "He's almost one of a kind. The rumor is that he's bulletproof."

"If your master has the money to fund coke, then we can give this guy enough money to help. He doesn't need to know who you are. I can deal with him, and I can pose as a DEA agent or something."

"Let's sleep on it."

Groaan's house is a two story brick structure with a driveway almost as long as his ego. The long front and extended stairs leading to the front door remind me of a church. There's even a peak where the roof forms a triangle above the porch. A black iron gate opens to let us on the property. Once we're inside the garage, Groaan lets himself out, though I expected the driver to open the door for us.

Instead, the man behind the wheel leaves as soon as I walk around to join Walter at the back door. There's a long hallway, which passes a dining room with a fireplace, another hallway, and opens into a kitchen with a high ceiling. A railway reveals the second floor where a series of doorways lead to various rooms. And at the middle of this grand display is a boy who's staring at me through a cloud of smoke.

"This is my son, Murray," Walter gestures.

"Your boy likes to play with matches?"

"No," Walter turns away from the open refrigerator. "He's not an invalid. Our master does not like humans to perceive him, so he left."

Whatever the hell that means. I sit at the kitchen island across from Murray as Walter hands me a Coke and frosted glass with two ice cubes. He's got brown hair with streaks of blonde peeking out and a face that'd scare the most stern of Germans. If not for his small build, I'd swear he was forty. I'm guessing he's more my niece's age.

"Charles just got from New Orleans, Murray," Walter says. "He's going to stay with us until our master's dealings with Mr. Zigler are finalized."

Murray responds with a grunt and drinks a sip of water before his expressionless face squints at me.

"He's not strong enough," Murray says.

"Mind your goddamn tongue, son," Walter says. "You can't tell a man from looking at him."

The man-child hops down from the tall chair and walks out of the room to which Walter responds by laughing. If I pulled that shit with my father, I'd be on the floor with a black eye. I never dared speak to a guest like that.

"He's going to run our company in the coming years," Walter says. "Bright, and strong for his age, but Murray doesn't have much contact with people."

"Well, I appreciate you letting me stay," I say. "I really need a shower."

"Right," Walter nods. "You can have any room upstairs. I sleep in the master bedroom down here, and Murray has the basement."

"Your boy sleeps in the basement?"

"He has an apartment down there. Our master tends to him."

"Can you please tell me who that is?"

"There's a fully stocked bathroom in the bedroom on the far ends of the hallway. Choose whichever you like."

Walter adjourns to his bedroom, and I'm left with my Coke and the open air. I guess the *master* is grooming that child to be a cold son of a bitch that'll run a company most efficiently. That's what I choose to believe, anyway.

There's a shiny wood staircase leading to the second floor and I'm having trouble catching my breath before I open the first doorway. My first move is to strip and walk straight to the bathroom. I don't want to think anymore. No more inner monologue about how this life is cruel and unjust. The hot water scalding my skin is all I want.

At Harvard, I took a religion course that broadly explained many myths and the origins of religions. Muslims believe that all people are born Muslim. In order to convert from Christianity or another religion, you only need another Muslim to witness you stating that you renounce your former life and accept Allah. Of course, Allah is the Muslim word for God, and they worship the same God Jews and Christians do. Whenever I hear some Atlanta redneck say some shit about Muslims worshipping some other deity, I want to take their face and hold it against a sharpening jig.

Once you accept Allah as your one true God, you take a shower to wash away who you once were. I like the basic symbolism. There's no extended process where you speak with a minister or have to study a bunch of bullshit books. It helps to read the Qu'ran, but a lot of Muslims haven't done that. It's not like all Christians read the Bible.

I dry off and don't bother putting on boxers before getting in the bed and lying on my back. The veins in my head beat like a stranger knocking on someone's front door. There's a pause between the intense pulsing.

As I'm drifting, I smell smoke again. At the foot of the bed, a man stands engulfed in flames. The fire extinguishes when I rise while he seems to inhale all of the fumes. His skin appears black until it clears in to a pale flesh.

"You ask who their master is," He speaks. "We've met in your dreams before, Charles."

My vocal cords can't move as my mouth inhales but can't exhale. The man's face becomes clearer. His black goatee outlines teeth so white and sharp, they must be false and filed.

"I don't need to say who I am. You humans know me, but continuously deny my presence. Murray fails to see your true strength, and Walter overestimates you. It's your position and ability to adapt that I admire. I so rarely admire a human. You possess great capacity for Evil. In the morning, look to your bedside table. A DEA identification card and badge will help you convince Arthur, but you will have to appeal to his blood lust. I fear his power will inhibit us in the future, so you must never reveal your true self. Never speak Walter's name."

The room darkens, and my body jolts when my eyes open and the window lets the light shine in my eyes. The problem with dreams is that I can't tell if they're real or my subconscious. How literally should I take them?

Indeed, there's a DEA badge next to a set of Ford keys on the bedside table. Walter wrote his number on a card with a message: *There's a million in cash in the trunk. If you need anything else call me*. Even if Walter has all the money in the universe, I still have to take on Cuba and Atlanta. My skin isn't bulletproof, after all.

The *master* who visits me in my dreams can't be the Devil, right? I'm a Harvard man. What use do I have for Heaven and Hell when the co-exist on Earth thanks to cocaine and hot pussy? The pleasures of this world distract us, and when we look away, reality inflicts pain. If I am dealing with the Devil, then there's a God, and I'm going to Hell. I'd rather believe in gray oblivion than consequence after death.

Walter thought of everything but a gun and Arthur's address. Maybe that weird kid is downstairs and he'll know. He thinks he knows everything, I'm sure. I put on clean boxers, a shirt, and jeans before tossing my dirty ones in the extra compartment in the overnight bag. Looking over the railing above the kitchen, I don't see or hear anyone, so I'm fucked.

Outside there's a Ford Mustang parked in front. One of the newer ugly ones. Just to be sure, I open the trunk to discover a briefcase and a case for a shotgun. When I open it up to see what model, there's a small 9mm next to the .12 gauge. Still, I don't know where the hell I'm going.

There's a Waffle House a few miles down the road, so I can get some breakfast before calling Walter and asking for the address. Of course, when I climb into the car, Arthur's exact address is taped to the steering wheel. Some place in Piedmont, Alabama. The guy ended the war, yet he lives in the butthole of America.

After driving from Birmingham all around Atlanta, I don't want to be on the road anymore. A few days of sleeping, watching TV in my underwear with a few empty beer bottles on the coffee table, and Genesis' *Duke* blaring on the stereo might provide some incentive to leave.

Piedmont collects all the old houses from your nightmares of destitution and combines them with gas stations, a couple of grocery stores, and nothing. There aren't a lot of trees, but the place is surrounded by mountains. It was sunny in Atlanta, but I feel like it's always overcast here.

Arthur's address leads me to a trailer park with empty lots and structures that resemble houses, but the city should've condemned them in the seventies when they were already black bananas hosting maggots. I turn into the gravel driveway where his number is listed, and there's a singlewide with weeds consuming the foundation. Rust stains run down from every window.

A man who lives in this contraption is dangerous enough to pull a gun on me before I knock. But if the mythos is true, I'd only piss him off more if I fired back. If I'm a DEA agent who wants Arthur to help me on a mission to Cuba, then I have to drop my smart act for a while.

I wait on the porch and hear someone rustle around inside. A boy looks out a window and I hear him call out to someone. The locks jiggle and the kid leans his face out the crack of the open door.

"Hello," I nod. "Is Arthur in?"

"Why're you lookin' for him?"

"I work for the drug enforcement agency and my supervisor requested I speak with Arthur Lindsay. He does live here, right?"

"Government? Got ID?"

I open the badge and hand it to the boy. The door opens further to reveal stains on his wife-beater and distinguished muscles on a lean frame. When I first saw him, I figured he was about fourteen, but now I believe it's Arthur. Walter didn't tell me he was so young.

"Mr. Lindsay?" I smirk. "Are you Arthur?"

"What's the DEA want with me? Army told me I was free to snort Alabama dry if I wanted."

"No, that's not why I came. We need you."

"You need to screw me again? I fuckin' won the war for you cunt-holes, and..."

Arthur looks inside and shakes his head with a cluster of curses under his breath. Does he have a wife in there? I pity the woman who'd take up with a war hero only to live here. I'd expect the government to build me a palace if I cut off a dictator's head. Maybe they let him keep it as a trophy?

"Mind your mouth," He says. "I was in the middle of feedin' mama. Come in."

There's a sleeper sofa pulled out with sheets hanging off the frame facing a television. The bunny ears have so much tinfoil he should be able to pick up signals from California. In the dining area, because it's all one big room, a woman in a wheelchair sits with her fingers stuck in her mouth.

"Sorry, mama," He sits down next to her.

I pull up the other chair and sit across from the brittle haired woman. He's got to be nineteen, and she must've had him in her forties. All the Alabama inbreeding must account for his dead father and thick skin.

"Arthur," I say, "The DEA is prepared to pay you a million dollars for this favor. That's just upfront."

"Chucky, I ain't got use for money when the government discharged me without so much as a bonus. They consider my actions to be a threat to international law. I say I'm the most American

mother... Jesus. I'm sorry mama. I'm owed enough. A million or a billion dollars won't change my mind."

"A million in cash for one little favor won't sway you?"

"No."

I look at the brown ceiling and wonder who wouldn't take the money just to get out of here. Even a rich man wouldn't sneeze at six zeros. If you offered me a million bucks to do anything, I'd probably do it.

Then I have to consider this man's sense of pride. The stereotypical Southern hubris. Maybe if he was a farmer, he wouldn't accept the money, but he'd take cattle. There's a bargaining point that he won't refuse because the offer is something tangible. Maybe cash is too unpredictable. Some people might consider it a burden to suddenly have all of this money. They'd have to find a place to hide it and buy stuff without the IRS noticing. Sure, you can afford a fifty-thousand-dollar car now, but the dealership reports to the same federal agency you do every year filling out those tax return forms. A soldier doesn't want another cross to bear. A Southern man wants something in trade that he can touch.

"So, why did you stick around Piedmont after Korea?"

"Where else have I got to go? I got mama to take care of. A man can't just abandon his mama."

"You ever consider moving with your mom?"

"Where to?"

"Your own place, maybe. Here in Piedmont, even."

Arthur gets up to put his mother's empty oatmeal bowl in the sink and speaks to himself as he washes out the remaining residue. The old lady stares into space without any clue that I'm here. Maybe he needs an excuse to get out of here but feels guilty for feeling so?

"What're you offering, Chucky?"

"Land," I say. "Maybe a house on top of it. A barn or storage shed. A long driveway surrounded by trees where you won't have to worry about people bothering you."

"The DEA is willing to do that for me? What is it that you want outta me?"

"When the army discharged you, did you lose your balls?"

"Excuse me?"

"You got anything against killing?"

"Course not," Arthur sits back down. "I'm not a hitman, though."

"It's a onetime transaction. You and I go to Cuba and we put an end to the South East's cocaine habit."

"Hell I like cocaine. I thought the government did too."

"Coming out of Mexico, sure. Not red Cuba, though. You get what I mean, Arthur?"

"Fuckin' commies," He says. "Sorry mama."

"And when we get back, I promise you the land. You can have the money if you want it."

"Naw," He says. "You keep the Benjamins. Just turn away if you see me with any white boogers."

"What about her?"

"Oh... Mama?"

Arthur leans back in his chair with a sigh before going to the window above the sink. Pulling a revolver from a drawer, he reaches out this tiny window and fires a round out. I hear someone open their front door and yell out.

"Hey Baxter!" Arthur says. "Watch mama for me. I'm going on a trip."

Arthur opts to meet me in Miami so he can make proper arrangements for his mother. I can't take the guns on a plane, so I drive over night, sleep in a motel, and make my way to Miami International to pick him up. The plan thus far succeeded, but I don't know where to go. How do we get to Cuba? Where do we go in Cuba? Who do we kill in Cuba?

I have a million in cash, so I could buy a boat, but what about the coast guard? I have DEA credentials, yet they might ask to speak to my superior officer. I could put them in touch with Walter. I'm supposed to be some brilliant planner, yet I'm considering letting Arthur figure this out. How would that look if I'm posing as a government agent?

Walter didn't give me this info, and I have his number, so I pull off at a gas station near the airport and close myself off in the phone booth. Whoever was in my dream sort of warned me to not bother Walter, but we're supposed to be working together.

"Charles," He answers. "How's the beach?"

"I can't see it from here," I say. "But I need a little help on this."

"You didn't bother to check your glove compartment, son?"

"Guess not."

"It'll be alright, Charles. You got a good soldier with you. Our master will protect you as long as you serve our purpose."

I don't even want to know what the hell he means, so I hang up and look at the plane landing at the airport for a moment. Am I doing this for Nicole? This is the first time I've thought of her since Walter broke the news she was gone. Is she worth more murder, or does something about the danger entice me?

Too much thinking is why I turned to cocaine and Heineken, so I go back out to the Mustang and open the glove compartment. Inside is a manila envelope containing photographs of what looks like a farm, a man with an impressive long beard, and two maps. One map looks like a cut out from a world map that would cover a living room floor with just the tip of Florida and Cuba. Another is of the island and a circled area called El Agujero.

I can buy or rent a boat, a couple of heavier guns, and we'll head off to Cuba as soon as we have our bearings. A speed boat might go ninety RPM and it's about two-hundred-and-twenty miles to Cuba, so the trip will take five to six hours back and forth. Obviously, we can't spend the night in a cushy hotel there, so once we do this, we have to come back immediately.

Arthur's quite fashionable in his camouflage pants and black t-shirt. Instead of luggage, he carries a cherry slushy and strolls to the car like I'm picking up an overgrown child from football practice.

"You got a gun for me, right?" He asks before shutting the door.

"Arthur, how many people do you know who fly from Birmingham to Miami without a bag or suitcase?"

"What the fuck do I need a bag for?" He winces.

"The traffic around here," I shake my head. "How the hell do I find the freeway from here?"

"Just pull out in front of someone and go, Chucky. This ain't a weekend getaway where we're oiling up our dicks and listening to Steely Dan."

"Alright," I hit the accelerator. "We have to rent a boat. Or buy one. Someone might steal the thing once we get to Cuba. Then we have to deal with the coast guard. They might want to search us, but hopefully they'll let us go based on my credentials."

"You got a briefing I can peek at, Chucky?"

"Glove compartment," I say. "Some bearded guy runs an operation in El Agujero."

"We're just supposed to kill him?" Arthur says. "Doesn't feel like much of a good time. We'll need gasoline for that cocoa field. You any good with a rifle?"

"We're just going to take him out and go."

"No, see, you can kill the bastard, but someone else will just take his place. Business as usual, Chucky. If you set fire to his farm, then you'll really fuck up some cocaine trade."

"If you want to, I won't stop you. My objective is to take that man out."

"It's best to scope it out before just running in to shoot people, though. I can do it, but you'd be hiding like a bitch in the trees. Might catch a stray bullet doing that."

"Now look," I say. "I appreciate your expertise. Right now, we have to get down there first."

"What guns ya got, though? We both need pistols, and one of us should have a rifle. Got a rifle with a scope, Mr. DEA?"

"I have the standard issue 9mm and a twelve gauge if things escalate in crowds."

I don't know what I'm talking about, but he's right. If I *okay* everything Arthur says, I come off a stupid. He needs to believe I'm with the DEA.

"As a DEA agent," I say, "I can't be the guy who buys illegal weapons. We have plenty of cash at our disposal, so I need you to make the deals, and preferably within the hour."

"I got a guy," Arthur says. "Served with him. If you park in his neighborhood, I can make a deal."

We end up in a cul-de-sac off the strip, and I let Arthur out before turning around and finding a spot. I gave him ten grand and told him to do with that as he saw fit. There's an element to Arthur that I automatically trust because he's a soldier. I'm not certain that I should.

But being alone brings Nicole to mind. Is Zigler routinely letting his friends rape her? Maybe he keeps her sedated and in bed. Or she could be roaming his house in a bikini like a Bond girl playing along with the villain. Every day I let her stay with him, I lose a piece of our relationship. By the time I see her again, we might go our separate ways like I planned. Would I really dump her like that, though? I might've come back to her after a week apart. I just wanted her to clean up.

Arthur knocks on the window and I pop the trunk. He's carrying what looks like a guitar gig bag, and I hope he got his own pistol. Once he's back in the car, I'm wondering how many bread crumbs we're leaving around the city. Some people probably saw me pick him up at the airport. Now we're in a ruined suburban neighborhood where children of the forties have given up their dreams, and he left a house carrying firearms.

"You get plenty of ammunition?" I ask.

"Enough," Arthur says. "You decide if we're renting or buying a boat?"

"Do you know a boat guy too?"

"No, but I know where we can steal one."

"How do you know this area?" I ask.

"Because when our boys are on leave, they like to find lots of pussy and blow. No better place than Miami to get your nut."

"Did the army train you to steal boats?"

"No, you ignorant sperm-chugger. I know how to handle stolen boats, though."

Miami has plenty of boat marinas, but there's a question of who will see us running off with a speed boat? If the coast guard discovers us in a stolen boat, we're fucked. We compromise and decide to offer money to someone for their boat with the promise to return it with interest. If we lose the thing, they still have the money we gave them. What yuppie doesn't love more blow money?

My issue is that Arthur looks like he's a serial rapist ready to kidnap every white man's daughter and sodomize them with seagull carcasses. If he combed his hair, put on some jeans, and stopped coming up with new homophobic and sexist slurs, he might blend in with the Miami crowd. At least as an Alabamian tourist.

This time, I make him wait in the Mustang while I go make a deal. Now I have to pose as a DEA agent posing as a shady tourist looking for a quick shot to Cuba. I'm not old enough to pull off the government employee look, but I'm good at shady.

There's a gentleman in Sherbet colored cut off shorts and a white Polo chatting up a girl in a bikini who's young enough to be his daughter, but her body language tells me she's jailbait looking for fun. They're standing next to a black boat that looks like Don Johnson's wet dream. In this decade, everything is bright, but if you're rich enough, you can afford to go dark. It's the Wall Street way.

"This your boat?" I pipe in.

"...I mean, you're young, but have you had Patron? There's some on board..."

"This guy's wanting to talk to you," She points at me.

"Yeah, get lost, pretty boy," The guy waves me away.

"So you wouldn't be interested in a buyer?"

"Ha," He scoffs. "Like you could afford it."

"How much was it?" I ask. "I'm thinking about getting into boating, but I'm not sure I'm ready to drop six figures."

The girl walks in the other direction as soon as the graying man turns his attention to me. If you add enough zeros in your conversation, everyone listens. I did that girl a favor too.

"This one cost me over a hundred-K," He says. "I just bought it last month, so..."

"Well, I was hoping to make an arrangement with you. I can double how much you put down if you let me take it out for a day."

"Wait, you want to borrow my boat for two-hundred-thousand? I'd sell it to you for that and I'd be ripping you off. What's the catch?"

"Your silence," I say. "Look, if I don't come back, you can just say I bought it. But I might be back at the dock early tomorrow morning, and I'll leave extra on board for you."

"Umm," He says. "Are you jerking me off here?"

"I have cash," I say. "Follow me back to my car and bring your keys."

The gentleman and I return to the Mustang where Arthur is cranking the radio and head banging to "Radio Ga Ga," which almost makes sense. Mr. Orange Shorts stops and looks, so I

open the trunk and click open the briefcase Walter left me. Counting out twenty stacks, I grab a McDonalds bag I threw back here and stuff the money inside. Without a handshake or nod, my new friend hands me the keys and walks away with his small fortune.

I'm not sure how we're supposed to move our guns to the boat, but if we act suspicious then we'll be suspicious. My new concern is keeping the boat from running out of gas. There's a storage compartment with two gas cans filled with safety lids on board, which I hope is enough. I'm running this operation on a lot of hope and empty promises.

"Are we forgetting anything?" I ask. "We have gas, guns, a boat, and the maps."

"Think we ought to stop back into town and find you a boyfriend?" Arthur asks.

"Can you actually get us there?" I ask. "I could always hire a driver."

"Bitch, you've got me. I'm costing you enough."

The ocean reflecting the sunset makes my eyes water, which is the first real emotion I've felt other than anger or fear. Why is it that society expects men to hold back their tears, and it's genuinely difficult to will myself to release that sadness? The island's in sight, yet my goal is undefined. I should let Nicole go.

Arthur's laughter reminds me of the journey. I feared Harvard and considered never going to college at all. I'm taking a year off before going to law school because I'm a fuck up and want to have fun, yet I'm about to be in Cuba to kill someone again. One murder does not make a serial killer.

I pull out the rifle, double check the chamber to ensure there's not a round, and look through the scope. The water looks clearer around the shore, and the palm trees aren't unlike Miami. No one's around, though. A beach without people tells me this isn't a quaint tourist spot. Behind those trees is The Hole and possibly a small army ready to kill me.

Arthur cuts the engine and lets the boat glide to the sand before jumping out to tie us to the nearest sturdy tree. I toss him the shot gun and grab the rifle with a gas can. This time, I load a round into the chamber as we kneel and run off the sand.

A few paces in the woods reveals the operation: a load of tarps loaded with ammonia and cocoa leaves. Little boys mix chemicals together into barrels as others pull coca from the makeshift pool. A couple of hired guns, no older than seventeen, stand near the field of bushes. I don't want the kids to get hurt, though they may run off for help. Arthur may not show them the mercy I'd like.

"Where's your bearded ball sack?" Arthur asks.

"There's a shed over there. I see cigar smoke," I say.

"Jesus, the smell here. I'd rather snort chicken shit."

With my scope locking in, I see the outline of a plush beard on the man sucking on a lit cigarillo. If I make a shot now, the chaos will prevent us from setting the plants on fire. Better to let Arthur sneak through and let out some gas on them before taking any shots.

"I know you're a trained soldier," I say, "But it's key that you empty that gas can before we fire."

"Alright, Chucky. Fire first, shoot later."

On the off chance someone spots Arthur, I need to keep the rifle ready. I don't know if he's really bullet proof, but I'm leaning on the negative. Always assume the worst will happen and prepare before the fan even comes on.

He crawls, stopping behind a tree whenever the gunmen look around, and I can't hear his movements. At the edge of the field, he lets the coca consume him as the gas begins to pour. My ass is clenching while the little boys in the pool rake out the leaves and they're put in the chemicals. How much cocaine can those boys be responsible for? If this is Zigler's source, then they must be working seven days a week with multiple batches each day.

The teens point their guns and shout as the field begins to smoke and flames sizzle through the bush. I shoot one in the stomach with the hope he'll just play dead, and the other begins to run. Rounds fire aimlessly from his pistol, and Arthur stands at the pyre with the shotgun ready. He lets the boy get close enough to touch before the ground is covered in the dead boy's blood and tissue.

The bearded man runs toward Arthur with his own shotgun, and I watch Arthur fall after he takes a round to the right.

Shooting the target feels justified now. He takes my shot in the left shoulder, which is enough to send him into the burning field. The bullet doesn't kill him, and my fist tightens around the barrel as the aged man shrieks several octaves above his natural timber.

But Arthur stands up and looks to me with a thumbs up. How the hell is he still alive after that blast? And as I predicted, those boys from the pool are running and screaming. If we get out in the water now, we might take a few shots, and the boat might sink.

I can't mourn something I haven't done yet, but I aim at one of these children and I can kill this innocent little person to save us. My finger touches the trigger, and I consider the alternative. We run away from gunfire. We die swimming in the ocean. At this range, it's possible my bullet won't strike him, though. How cold hearted am I to consider ending his life?

He's down, and Arthur's chasing after the other one. When the last gunshot echoes through the palm trees, I look at our work. It only took a few minutes to destroy all of this. That's a job well done, right? But we didn't know these people. They didn't fuck our wives or steal our prized Gibson Les Paul that was originally owned by Eric Clapton. That guy with the beard was always just that guy with the beard. What was his name? This operation was probably to feed his family, because given the condition of this place, I'm betting he didn't live in a drug lord's palace.

"Come on," Arthur runs back, "There's no way the cavalry isn't on the way."

"Right," I say. "We can ruminate on this later."

I can smell the ammonia and smoke as the boat cranks up, and I push us further into the ocean. Jumping on board, I turn to see our work. The sun's not gone yet. Only a moment ago, I looked at it like a father holding his newborn child.

Arthur's shouting in celebration while I watch the horizon grow around us, and I see David's body at my feet again. He's not moaning in pain, and he won't get up to resume our fight. David's eyes are shut permanently. It took a moment to end his life, and I started and couldn't stop.

The way Arthur chased after the other boy without chewing me out for killing a child is what breaks the threshold. A tear burns through and rolls down my face as dusk begins. I lean over the edge as acid grabs at my esophagus and pours into the salty abyss.

"When can I expect my new spread, Chucky?"

Miami International isn't as crowded at night, but I'm not keen on sitting in the car with Arthur another moment. I do owe him the land and house, so maybe my new master will help. But right now, I don't want to talk about reimbursing Arthur for genocide.

"As soon as I get back to Washington, Arthur."

"If I don't hear anything," He says, "I'll find you."

And Arthur Lindsay exits the scene in his camo pants and sweat soaked shirt. I'm not eager to relive what happened today, though. Atlanta will still be there when I get home tomorrow evening, so why go to bed sober?

At the liquor store down the street from my motel, a Cuban prostitute leans against a lamp post and eyes me. If she takes dick for money, I'm guessing she at least has herpes. Maybe crabs. I wouldn't even want to share a bed with someone who had crabs. Still, looking at her makes me reconsider my plan to buy a six pack and cheap burgers. I can't risk being seen in a bar. Going to a dive and hitting on a waitress seems low.

Inside, I eye the Jack Daniels and Crown Royal with more lust than the hooker. Dark liquor makes for bad hangovers. Vodka can be dangerous for alcohol poisoning. Beer will generally fill you up before getting too fucked up. I knew several Harvard peers who went to the ER at keggers, but I'm only wanting to erase today.

In the spirit of Miami, I grab some Corona and go to the counter. Instead of my ID, I accidently flash the bag boy my DEA ID, which might get me killed in Atlanta, and he doesn't ask any questions before ringing me up.

"Drinking alone, baby?" The Cuban girl asks.

I keep walking and bite my lip for being so rude to her, but if I start talking, I won't stop until she's sucking my dick. If I find some other girl, I'm cheating on Nicole. Why remain loyal to a kidnapped girl who got me into this shit?

After five beers, I'm still feeling something. The motel doesn't have MTV, so I'm forced to watch a *Cheers* marathon on the local station. There's nothing more depressing than Norm Peterson when you're already sunken into despair. Something about how dim that bar is makes me uncomfortable.

I chug my last Corona and turn out the lamp with enough pillows propped up so I can see the TV. Even with a buzz, Diane gets on my nerves with her shitty perm and pseudo-intellectual quips. She never realizes that she's a loser like the rest of the bar flies. The whole reason Sam keeps the bar is so his dying fan base surrounds him each day, but he never pretends he's not one of them. I heard Shelly Long might leave next year. If only she could take Kelsey Grammar with her.

"Sam," Carla calls, "Can we get another beer for Chucky over here?"

"Don't worry Carla," Woody pours from the tap, "I got it."

"Say, Sammy," Cliff says, "How's Carla gonna get on the other side of the screen there?"

"Carla's so sharp she can slice right through," Norm says.

The studio audience laughs, but Carla's face presses against the camera with the mug foaming in her hand. Sam picks up her legs behind her, and her curly mop pokes through the TV first followed by her blackened eyes and iconic gapped tooth grin.

"Here ya go, Chucky!"

I lean over to take the mug and sit at the edge of the bed to take my first sip. If Norm can guzzle it like water, surely I can swallow it faster. Halfway through, I choke and some falls down my chin. Sam tosses a towel into my room and winks as I mop up the suds from my chest.

"This one's on the house," He says. "You deserve it after what you went through with those kids."

The screen grows as the bar expands in front of my face, and a wide shot reveals the entire cast looking at me with their drinks extended in the air. Floorboards beneath the table on stage right creak open and four little hands creep into the shot.

"Guess you spoke too soon, Sammy," Norm peers over the bar.

Two Cuban boys crawl out of the floor and the camera zooms into their faces as each lets out a scream which create a dissonance over one another. I smell smoke as it pours from the TV set, and the boys beat on the glass separating us. Carla and Sam help hoist the kids through, and they claw for me as I back up on the bed unable to speak.

A flash runs past me and takes the boys down and pins them to the floor where they turn to dust, and the form rising above them turns to me. In the shadows, I see blonde hair and glowing red eyes. She climbs onto the bed and bares her fangs.

"Charles," Nicole says. "I don't need you to save me. I'm already gone."

My heart's beating so hard that I hear it as I open my eyes to see the sun illuminating my room. The TV is off. Covering my hand to feel my pulse, I breathe in slowly to calm down. With a hard exhale, I go to the bathroom and dunk my head under the faucet and drink as much water as I can.

I've never had a nightmare that vivid. When I can't distinguish when I was awake and asleep, I can blame the alcohol, but something's sending me a message. What if I wasn't asleep and blacked out before morning? Demons must be haunting me, or my subconscious feels endangered.

Without changing or brushing my hair, I grab my overnight bag and walk out to the Mustang. I can't get to Atlanta soon enough. Doom looms over me, and if I don't kill Zigler soon, I'm going to jump off a bridge or snort that entire bag of cocaine I hid at the church.

Eric Clapton's "Behind the Mask" fades out while I put the Mustang in park outside Walter's house. If he can get me a car, I hope he has a maid ready to do my laundry while I pass out. These long drives are wearing my will to live down. Seeing that little shit kid of his won't help.

The front door's unlocked, so I go straight up the stairs to the guest room and toss my bag down. Landing on the bed, I try to suffocate myself in the sheets before I hear someone at the door. Walter's holding up a tuxedo and lays it next to me on the bed before sitting in the easy chair adjacent from the bed.

"I heard you promised Arthur some land," He says. "A house too."

"He wouldn't take the money."

"You know I offered him more than a million, right? The property and construction won't even go beyond five-hundred-thousand. You're a damned good negotiator."

"All you gotta do is appeal to his pride."

"Well, I hope you saved some smarts for a party tonight."

"Like, right now?"

"In an hour, there's a black tie in Cumberland. The host's name is Dominic, and she's trying to take over your pal David's business in Buckhead. After David, she's Zigler's top dealer in Atlanta. With the news from Cuba, and I applaud your scorched Earth tactics, the price for a gram just went up."

"Won't Zigler be there?"

"He's trying to deal with his new crisis. He's not sure if locals destroyed his crop, but he's not convinced you do it. Since you're not at your house and your car is parked in Al's garage, Zigler thinks you abandoned Nicole and went to Canada or something."

"You want me to kill this Dominic?"

"She's going to have a lot of elite people there," Walter nods. "You can't just shoot her."

"Is she pretty?" I ask.

If she's a drug dealer and looking to party, I can get in her bedroom and finish her silently. Maybe with a staged overdose? Certainly not a strangulation. If I go in that room with her, people will see us leaving together. It has to look like we were having a good time and it went too far.

"She's not my type," He says. "A woman in the drug trade isn't around to look pretty. She's there to make money."

"Does she have any romantic relation to Zigler?"

"He's not that sloppy."

"Then I'll pull something off," I say. "I can drown her in the bathtub if I have to."

"Our master can only protect you so much, Charles. Keep it quiet, and get out of there."

With my new tux on, I arrive at Dominic's apartment across from the Westin and Cumberland business park. A black gentleman in a white uniform lets me in without asking for an invite. I slip him a fifty and look around the place.

There're a lot more here than at David's party the night I met Nicole, but Dominic's apartment is darker with purple walls, a black granite floor, and curtains obscuring the view. A few lamps create a cozy atmosphere as "Shock the Monkey" plays from a Pioneer CD stereo under the TV, which is playing a muted *Cosby Show*.

If this is her proposed Buckhead clientele, these guys in Sears and JC Penney suits might fool me. There's a twenty-something girl doing a line on the coffee table, which makes a Hispanic woman wearing a purple dress sneer. Perhaps that's Dominic?

"Nice place," I say.

"Who're you?" She asks.

"Someone who can afford to buy your limited supply."

"If you want coke, I have some in the kitchen, but it's five hundred to even go in there."

"Did your young friend over there pay that?"

"Her sugar daddy did, yes."

"How much for the whole pile?"

"I'm having a party, mister. I'm not selling anything that big."

"How much will three grand buy?"

"Excuse me."

Dominic sits down with the overzealous girl and her gray haired boyfriend, so I walk over to the open ice chest and grab a Miller. Better to swing and miss than strike out with a woman of such distinction. She makes David look like the king of yuppies.

This place has one bedroom, an enclosed kitchen, and the living room is full of gaudy assholes. The guy at the door is big enough to sit on me and it wouldn't be five minutes before my lungs gave out. Walter expects me to kill Dominic, but I don't think it's happening here.

Opening the blinds, I look out to see the Westin across the street. How hard would it be for me to carry that rifle Arthur bought in Miami up there and leave after firing a few shots? I'll have cop cars running me over before I even get out on the street. If I can't get away with this in the apartment or with a rifle, then I have to lure Dominic out of here.

"Are you just here for free beer?" Dominic points at me. "Cause if you're not a buyer, then you can leave."

"I offered you three grand, didn't I?" I ask.

"And I'm not selling like that."

"Are you interested in buying?'

"Buying what?"

"I came here in a fresh tux expecting to meet a business woman, and all I see are a bunch of coke heads from Perimeter. After what happened to your supplier, I doubt you'll have enough to last you through the month. Maybe not even the week."

"You got something for me?"

"I know where your recently departed friend's supply is," I say. "Zigler killed the boy who took it, you know?"

"Nah, that ain't what I heard."

"You interested?"

Dominic grabs my wrist and takes me out into the hallway, but she leads us down the stairwell instead of taking the elevators. She definitely doesn't have the walk of a woman looking to blow me. I feel more like a heifer ready for slaughter.

"My car is across the street," I say.

"Pull around," She says. "Ain't you a gentleman?"

"Of course."

I dodge a Corvette while running to the parking lot next to the Westin. Once I get in the car, I pull my 9mm out from under the seat and shove it in the driver door. If I had some cord or handcuffs, I'd hold the gun to her head and put the barrel against her asshole. Maybe tickle her vagina with the butt and ram it in her. Such torture fantasies give me some arousal, but why bother when I'm just going to kill her?

Dominic gets in and I consider taking her to the church. It would be a good place to bury her, and I might convince her to blow me for the coke. Why am I objectifying her like this? How horny am I? Something about her rigged jaw line and short thick legs makes me want to explore. With a gym bag full of powder, I might ask to blow in her ass. I get hard looking at her feet pressing against the dash.

"Getting comfortable?" I ask.

"We're just getting the coke and coming back," She says. "Nothing else."

"How much do you have left?" I ask.

"Why'd you need to know?"

"Curious. Zigler hasn't cut you off already?"

"He's not letting anyone have more coke right now. That's why I'm selling it so high tonight."

"You're not going to be out after the party, are you?"

"Why do you ask so many questions? Are you a narc or something?"

I could whip out the badge. That might make her talk more, or she might try to hit me in the face and jump out of the car. Before she dies, I need something out of her. Maybe a little blood play. I haven't gotten off since Nicole and I left Destin. Getting this backed up makes my balls so blue.

"Why don't you want to have any fun with me?" I ask.

"What do you want? I'm just after the coke."

"You didn't bring any money."

"I have plenty at my apartment."

"Not enough," I say. "I'm not exactly strapped for cash."

Dominic looks out the window as I cross over to I-20, and the way her shoulders lower and feet go back into her heels tells me I'm hitting a weak spot. She's probably fucked for drugs before. Maybe not Zigler, but she wasn't always the queen of Cumberland. There's probably a man nearby that sells five times as much.

"Are you clean?" I ask.

"What?"

"Do you have herpes or anything?"

"No," She says. "I haven't been fucked in two months. Last time, I thought I was pregnant and I haven't been right since."

"What are we going to do when you see all that coke?"

"I don't know."

"I'll let you have all of it. You can have it all for free."

"Not really free, is it?"

I think there's another way. If I kill her tonight, then I don't gain anything. All my coke and money give me power over her, and I can get more than a blowjob from power. It's not like I have a timeline for murder. Any information she can give me is useful. Walter might think he knows everything, but he can't read minds.

"When was the last time you saw Zigler?" I ask.

"He left for Florida today," She says. "Damage control in Cuba."

"That means no more coke for anyone. Except you."

Dominic should be worried and asking questions. I'm a stranger taking her out of town to a dark exit without a service station anywhere near us. A mile down the road, and we're at the same dirt road Nicole and I discovered. Maybe it's worth dying for more supply when so much of her income is tied up in drugs?

I leave the headlights on and turn to her. Dominic keeps her gaze down and turned to her lap. She's not going into this whole sexual payment scene. Am I not her type? She needs to see the coke for inspiration.

"Alright," I say. "I want you to get out of the car, walk up those stairs, and wait at the door. Do not turn around. Stay up where until I say you can move."

Dominic follows my word, and I shove the pistol in my belt. If she doesn't play into my plan, I have to end this. When I approach her from behind, I know that I don't want to hurt her. She never did anything to me. The way I spoke to her turns my stomach, yet I know that I established dominance in the situation. A man either threatens a woman with violence or sex. Sometimes the latter is consensual, but how am I not raping her if she's under duress? How much better am I than Zigler if I do this? Isn't the point to not be the better man but get my girlfriend back, though?

"Let's go inside," I follow her in. "There're some loose boards next to the first pew on the right."

Dominic pulls up the boards with only the headlights guiding her, and out comes the duffle bag with a little dirt on the bottom. She opens the bag to reveal plastic bags full of white powder, and her mouth seems to melt into a hole.

"Zigler never let me have this much," She says.

"It's yours," I say, "Under certain conditions."

"Listen," She says, "I'm on my period. I'll pull out my tampon if you want. I'll even let you fuck me if you're still down. I need this cocaine!"

Now I can't even get laid. Should I have her blow me? The thought of her bloody vagina makes my dick shrivel into a stump. Shooting her will cause a mess and a lot of noise, so how do I do this? There's a lot of coke, and I'm betting she snort enough to at least pass out. Is that a practical kill? I have nothing to bury her with. Dumping a body in the woods is a great way to get caught.

"Let's go," I say. "Take it out to the car."

Without thanking me, Dominic runs out in her heels and purple dress with a gym bag of David's cocaine. I pop the trunk, grab the coke from her, and throw it next to the shotgun and rifle. When we're back in the Mustang, she's shaking.

"Do you know where Zigler lives?" I ask.

"No," She says. "I really don't."

"When we get back to your apartment," I say, "What are your plans?"

"I gotta hide that shit," She says. "Make a few calls around town to David's buyers."

"No one can know you have this," I say. "Zigler will kill you. Don't just sell it all at once or even over a few days. Act like you're actually out of supply."

"What good will that do me?"

"I'll give you money," I say. "And you will sell it all eventually."

"What are you getting out of this?"

"Don't ask me anymore questions. You just do as I say."

By the time we're back in Dominic's apartment, her muscle is picking up beer cans in the living room. He doesn't acknowledge us as she leads me through the kitchen where I see the residue of what was her cocaine supply on the kitchen counter on an antique mirror. Since I'm killing her and keeping the drugs out of circulation, I don't mind storing them here for her to be caught with if Zigler pays a surprise visit. I plan on being here anyway.

"How long is he going to be here?"

"He'll leave once the place is clean. There's a lock on the door..."

"Do you have any weapons I need to know about?"

"No," She says. "There's a 45 behind my stereo, but that's it."

"If you try anything, I'm not giving you a dime. I have over five-hundred-thousand stashed away and you'll get every cent of it if you're a good girl."

When Dominic tries to put the bag under her bed, I take the strap out of her hand and point at the clothes hamper in the corner. She pulls out all of her dirty clothes and tosses the bag inside followed by the sweat shirts, panties, and white socks. When she's not hosting parties, Dominic dresses like a crack house wife.

"Now," I sit on the bed, "Let's see that tampon."

Looking at the floor, Dominic swallows before pulling the straps of her dress down revealing a black bra and dark red panties. Revealing a white string coming out of her vagina, I motion for her to pull it out. I'm expecting that crimson and copper odor with blood clots covering an overgrown cotton ball, but it's clean. Either she keeps a tampon in to prevent potential rapists, which isn't the worst idea, or it's her last day.

"How long?" I ask.

"Four days."

"And long is it usually?"

"Sometimes five."

"When did you last shower?"

"An hour before you showed up."

I don't have a condom, but that's going to create barrier between us when I need full control. Really, I just need to get off tonight and get some rest. What are the chances she'll kill me in my sleep? I have to stay here or she'll run off with the coke.

"Dominic," I say, "My name is Charles Price. I am the one who killed David and stole his coke."

Pulling out my pistol, I hold the gun on my lap and turn off the safety followed by a bullet in the chamber. Her eyes turn to silver dollars watching me, but she's not screaming or backing away.

"I'm not going to use this," I say, "Unless you're bad. Are you going to be bad?"

"No."

"Will you be honest with me?"

"Yes."

"I want you to have the coke. I have no use for it. I am going to pay you too. Do you want the money?"

"Yes."

"Do you like me?"

"Not right now."

"My face. My body. Do you like me?"

"I guess."

"I'm not going to force you to say that you do. I just want to know."

"You're not bad for a white boy."

"Would it disgust you if I fucked you?'

"How can you ask me that with a gun out?'

"I told you I don't want to hurt you. I just told you I'm the reason your friend is in Cuba. Oh, I poured gasoline all over those coca bushes and killed everyone in The Hole."

"Agujero," She whispers.

"Yes," I nod. "I just got back from Miami tonight and threw on this tux just to see you."

Shaking too much to stand, Dominic sits down on her closed hamper and crosses her arms to cover her breasts. They're shapely with big round nipples. She doesn't shave, but obviously trims her bush. When I let her know my real name and what I've done, I'm hoping she'll trust me because I've got a price on my head. She doesn't seem pleased with Zigler, after all. I'm offering her something bigger than him: freedom.

"You said I couldn't ask any more questions."

"Because you know what you need to. What I need to know is are you going to help me?"

"You have a gun."

"And I can easily leave you with the coke, and you'll never have to see me again."

"But the money."

"Yes," I say. "You'll get both if you just keep your hands clean around me."

Holding the gun out, I offer for her to take it from me. At this point, I want her to trust me, and she could shoot me or call for her buddy to come in here. Dominic takes the 9mm and looks at me. We breathe the same air for a moment before she puts the safety on and stands to toss it in the hamper.

"Stay here, please," She says.

Pulling on a robe, Dominic goes out in the kitchen and I hear her open the door to tell her friend to leave. Once the front door shuts, she's rummaging for something, and I'm guessing it's the 45 she mentioned. Indeed, she returns with the big shiny weapon and hands it to me.

"Are you going to kill me in my sleep?"

"And have the cops show up when I have the most cocaine in Atlanta?"

"Do you want to hurt me at all?"

"Only if that's what you want," She says.

Leaning down, Dominic kisses me and bites my lip gently while reaching down my pants. She knocks the gun from my lap and pushes me back on the bed. Rubbing her tits in my face, I inhale her sweat and rose perfume. Taking one in my mouth, I suck and watch as she gasps and her nails scrape against my scalp.

I'm shuffling a deck across from Dominic while she lights a cigarette and exhales smoke onto the cards when they hit the table. She takes her hand and squints at the hearts, clubs, and diamonds. Somehow, I have all aces, and I'm going to take the pot. Pushing my chips forward, I go all in expecting her to call my bluff.

The cigarette smoke begins to smell like a bonfire as it fills the room, and I can't see her through the fog anymore. A hand reaches through as the cigarette falls to the table, and a man grabs me.

"We admire your plotting," He speaks. "As long as she dies, Nicole lives."

A framed picture falls between us of a black man wearing a white suit with a pronounced rose in his lapel. His smile has a pattern of gold teeth augmenting his bleached natural canines. The hand points at the image and smashes the glass.

"Ask her about Darius. She will help you take his soul."

Dominic rises from bed and I admire her body even as my eyes beg for more rest. I can't believe I made it through morning. She winks at me before heading into the bathroom. Now would be the time to put on my clothes and talk about whoever Darius is, but I miss the feeling of a new person beside me. With Nicole, I grew bored and always worried about her. You can't keep things fresh with anyone. Better to chase that feeling with the next lover.

She forgoes returning to bed and I hear her in the kitchen. Hopefully, she's not going to cook. Eating a stranger's food scares me worse than a loaded gun in my asshole. My worry subsides when she returns with two glasses of orange juice. When she's not looking, I smell it and don't sense anything amiss.

"Last night really cleared my mind," She says.

"Good," I say. "I need your insight on something."

"Oh?"

"Do you know a Darius?"

"He deals on west Atlanta," She says. "I've met him at parties with Zigler."

"Do you have his number?" I ask.

"Somewhere, I think."

"How would you like to take on his clientele?"

"What are you trying to do, Charles?"

"Make you more money."

Even as Dominic makes the phone call, I ponder if I'll shoot her too. My plan is to have them meet near I-20 in the next couple of hours, and I'll practice my sniper routine on Darius. I could get her in another shot, but why break my favorite egg when they're plenty more to crack?

I tell Dominic that we're going to show up with the coke, because he might not respond kindly if she shows up empty handed. She offers to sell him everything she has at the same price Zigler pays the Cubans because she wants to go to New York to see to her sick grandmother. Darius doesn't question or hesitate, so I grab the gym bag and guns before we head out.

Dropping Dominic off at the garden next to an office building resembling a disco ball, the Mustang climbs up four stories of a parking garage. Standing at the edge of a concrete structure aiming a rifle isn't smart, so I wait and watch for Darius.

If Dominic is willing, I'd run off with her to Texas or Mexico with the blow and cash. She's stable compared to Nicole. I'm not sure we have much to talk about, but I don't recall many in depth conversations with Nicole either. I expected to defile her and take pleasure in her apprehension. Instead, she rode me until I came inside her and we fell asleep not even a minute after. Thinking about her pussy makes me so hard my boxers are getting wet.

She sits on a bench reserved for yuppies on their lunch break or where they take calls out of the office on their brick cell phones. The garden has a couple of rose bushes, overgrown kudzu, and a green pond, which are all under the shadow of this futuristic monument to rich guys' dicks.

I'm not sure that she likes me at all, but I'll take my fun. The way she stands and looks at Darius as if her eyes were knives ready to carve into him tells me more about her stern character than when Nicole first approached me. It's like I upgraded to a real woman.

Darius holds out his arms and they embrace. Pulling up the scope, I need him to back away for only a moment. She'll run with the coke like she's an innocent bystander and I'll pick her up on the lower level of the garage. Like thieves in a bittersweet affair, we'll kiss as I smell his blood on her blouse.

As she opens the bag, Darius pulls a revolver from his pants and I let out a shot before he's able to cock it. My heart seems to push forward as the bullet leaves my gun, and it catches the bastard in the shoulder. He falls to the pavement, and Dominic takes off. Before he can reach for the weapon on the ground, I fire the final shot into his chest.

She's going to think I wanted that to happen, or I might be her hero. I'd like to say I'm a ruthless killer who took action when I saw my new lady friend in distress, but I throw the rifle in the trunk and my throat clenches as my breathing comes like a slow orgasm of blood. The wheel can't straighten in my grasp, yet I make it down to her, and she kicks the bag in the backseat where she collapses behind me.

"Why did we do this?" She shouts. "What have we gained? Zigler's going to know it was me, and I'm dead."

"Dominic," I say, "In a few minutes, I'm going to stop this car. I'm going to give you the keys, and you're going to drive until you're one the other side of the continent. Don't ever come back to Atlanta, and you'll be safe. In the trunk, there's the money I promised. There are guns too. You have all the money, coke, and protection you need to start over somewhere."

I expect her to sob and grab the keys from me in a dramatic gesture. Instead, she rises from the floorboard and wraps her hand around my arm. We see each other in the rearview mirror, and her eyes are white and clear. Dominic kisses my ear and down to my neck. Her fingers reach down my shirt and rub through my chest hair.

"Please," She says. "Let’s not do this again. Let’s forget we ever happened.”

Father places a box on my bed and avoids looking me in the eye as he notices the picture of Al holding me in the air the day he left for Harvard. Walking over, he admires the photo for a moment before peaking outside through the blinds.

"You were a lot more upset when Al left," I say.

"Son, I'm paying for four years at the most expensive school in the world, and you're going to fuck it up with some whore."

"Well, you die as soon as I meet her. It's not like you'd stop me from killing a drug dealer anyway."

"Enough talk," He says. "At least from you, son."

As if he throws dry ice into boiling water, father turns to steam, and the goateed man appears in the fog. I know he is not a magician, and he's definitely not God. Once again, my vocal cords can't move, and my room goes dark as if the sun burns out.

"What drives you towards the fire? Why walk through flames when you can turn towards the water? There're billions of women, and all I needed to do to get you riled was let Zigler take your girlfriend. Yet you've served me so much better than I thought possible. Walter wanted you to take out the dealers, and you burned a coca field to delay the supply. You manipulated Dominic into leaving the state and shot the biggest drug dealer in west Atlanta. There are two more large scale dealers to take on: Don Clark of Coweta County and Damian Nichols near Gainesville. I'm intrigued by how you decide to end their dealings."

Why do I sleep in my bedroom when I have a master bedroom down the hall? I could dismantle my parents' bed and put in a king with a TV. Pushing off my blanket, I look up at the picture my father looked at in my dream. My family isn't important anymore because there's nothing to tie us together but blood.

Surely Don and Damian know about Darius, but they can't know who killed him yet. With David dead followed by the Cuba incident, they're aware their lives are at stake. Maybe I can get them in the same room and convince them to raid Zigler's house for the last of the coke. One field in Cuba won't stop cocaine forever, but it's enough that Zigler's probably hoarding his supply.

I get that taking out the dealers one by one destroys Zigler's infrastructure, and there's no way he only had five dealers if he's such a big deal. If his network spans from Georgia to below Florida, then killing off the main players sends the message. At this point, I'm exhausted with the scenario and will probably just walk up to Don and Damian and shoot them.

But if Zigler dies, then another might take his place. How long will it take before I have Nicole with me and we're safe? I'm going to have to sell my soul or something.

My body count grows: three men and two children. I'm beyond being a serial killer. What frightens me is that it gets easier each time I pull the trigger, and how many more people I'll have to kill just for one girl. I'm resigned to this lifestyle and I'm too deep in the hole to climb out.

I only have father's revolver now. Asking Walter for anything seems out of the question given how I left. How can I make a six-shooter work against what could be an army of thugs in a crack house? Drawing them out together probably won't work given how Darius met his fate. Going to their homes and trying to blend in their crowd sure as hell won't work.

If Damian is near Gainesville, which is only a drive up I-85, I don't think he'll be in an urban area. Probably not even suburban compared to my neighborhood. Surely Walter can send me his address, though.

"You've got a pair of balls on you, Charles," Walter answers the phone.

"And you're aware of my other targets," I say. "Can you read me off their address real quick?"

"Our master was pleased with you," Walter says. "If you're going to be working for me, I can't let you go without reimbursement, especially when it comes to Him."

"So what?"

"You'll need a less flashy car than a Mustang. I had a Fairmont delivered to your driveway this morning. Everything will be in there for you like before."

"You're making this so easy yet so difficult."

"It'll get easier once you finish this."

The Ford Fairmont is indeed outside my garage. Keys are in the cup holder. Pictures of Damian and Don with their addresses written on the back are in the glove compartment. A scoped rifle, shotgun, and 9mm are in the trunk. Walter took notes on how I did Cuba and gave me everything I need to take these two goons out, and I'm standing outside in my underwear nonchalantly checking the sites on the rifle.

Holding the picture of Damian in the light, I'm surprised to see an older white man with a buzz cut checking the mail at a one-story brick house. His street address is 118 Peel St, which means he's on a residential road with neighbors. There're children who play in each other's yards and probably an ice cream truck they chase with faded dollar bills in the air. Housewives who probably ask to borrow Damian's plunger or if he has spare tin foil for their cable antennas.

I'm betting Damian doesn't deal out of his house unless he's well acquainted with a client. He's not going to let me in if I introduce myself and say Ray Ray told me I could get a rock from him. Parking nearby and waiting for him to leave won't work if they have a neighborhood watch. If I go at night, break in through the back, and shoot the fucker, I'm likely to get shot at.

I could call the police at night from a payphone, let out a few rounds into Damian's windows, and pull into an empty driveway waiting for them to show up to an agitated drug dealer. They might want to come inside, and that wouldn't sit well with him. All of my plans feel too sloppy, though. A man out in the open isn't afraid because he's protected by society's veil.

Where did I leave my DEA ID? I could've gotten a German Sheppard from the pound and showed up to ask a few questions. What would happen if I just show up, though? I could identify myself as Charles Price, the mastermind behind dismantling Zigler's empire, and get shot. Or he might let me in to talk.

But if I pulled into his driveway and just sat there, he wouldn't call the police. He'd definitely notice me and come outside, but I wouldn't have to roll down my window. Just look at him. Someone else might call the police. Without any cocaine or major cash, I don't have a shield. I'm just a stranger waiting to die.

It is possible he keeps his supply elsewhere? He may not mind the police showing up. Going in, shooting him, and speeding off seems like the most dangerous yet effective plan. How much protection does Walter's master have over me? Does it extend to the police?

I throw on some navy slacks, a blue cotton shirt, and Al's old tweed blazer he wore at Harvard. If I'm going to be a stranger coming in daylight to murder a drug dealer, I need to have a certain look. Like a used car salesman or private investigator. Rolling up I-85, I look in the rearview a few times to convince myself I look common enough to blend in a police lineup. This car is temporary. If the police pull me over under suspicion, I'll have my hair slicked back with my normal clothes in a black Porsche, and they'll never figure a good kid like me pulled off a random shooting. Does any of that matter if someone gets a good look at my face, though? How would anyone connect it to me?

With Darius, I was focused. I fucked Dominic and had a clear head. Put some distance between you and a target, and it's like shooting a cardboard cutout at the range. My only plan is to pull up, leave the motor on, knock on the door, shoot the guy in the stomach, a second time in the head, and run off. The fucker might not even be at home.

But there's a gray car parked outside this brick ranch house. Looks like a Trans Am. Despite my image of the neighborhood, there are no children playing outside or old ladies checking their mail. Damian hasn't mowed his lawn in about two weeks. I wouldn't call this a bad neighborhood, but certainly not a filming location for Andy Griffith.

As planned, I leave the Ford on, step onto the overgrown grass, the revolver's cocked in my hand, and I knock. The TV inside is playing some Saturday morning cartoons and I hear Damian raise his voice. When the door opens, a teenage girl cocks a groomed eyebrow over faded mascara. The revolver hides behind my ass.

"Is your dad home?" I ask.

What else am I supposed to say? I can't run away with a gun when she's seen me. In this split second of silence, I un-cock the revolver and shove it in my back pocket.

"My dad isn't here," She says. "You want Damian?"

"Is he in there?" I gesture to the living room.

"Bedroom," She says. "You want me to wake him?"

"No," I say. "But can I come in?"

This girl, who I'm guessing is Damian's jailbait girlfriend, closes the door behind us and looks around the hallway to the open bedroom door and blows a long sigh from her hardened lips. With the volume on the TV, I'm surprised he isn't awake. How'd he even hear my knock to yell out at her?

"Do you need some coke?" She asks.

"That's not why I'm here," I say. "Anyone else around?"

"Just me and Damian."

"Do you want to be here?"

"Got nowhere else to be."

"Where you from?"

"Tampa," She swallows.

"Why are you here?"

She shrugs. If this guy sells coke and lets his teenage girlfriend answer the door, I'm guessing she doesn't have anyone to miss her. At this point, I'm not going to leave and let this guy live because I don't want to hurt her, but I don't necessarily have to.

"If I go in there," I say, "Are you going to run outside?"

"Nah."

"Are you going to call the police?"

"They'll put me in a home. I don't want that."

"Alright," I walk up to her. "I promise to help you. You're going to leave with me after this, and I won't try anything. I just have to take care of this."

She nods and her eyes water. I feel like kissing her forehead and holding her, but she probably doesn't want to be touched. Instead, I walk over to the bedroom door and see Damian passed out face down on a bare mattress. The sheets are on the ground and covered in blood. If I didn't see him breathing, I'd swear he was murdered. Closing the door behind me, I ready the revolver. With a gunshot, you can be sure someone will wonder where it came from, but they're probably not going to call the police over one.

The bullet goes through the left side of his shaved head. Blood splatters on the mattress and I turn around before my eyes see too much. The girl's standing in the living room waiting without anything in hand. I nod towards the door and we head out to the Ford.

Taking this girl, who says her name is Penelope, to my house feels stupid, but she's far from home and obviously served as Damian's dick cushion. For some reason, I want to throw her in a shower, make her dinner, and let her stay until I figure out where she can go. It's not like I can raise a fifteen-year-old girl like a daughter when I'm six years older than her.

When we get in the house, I tell her where to find the linens and take whatever bathroom she likes. I put a pan on the stovetop and pour in some olive oil with garlic power before slicing some chicken breast into strips. While the meat sizzles, I pour some hot water into a small pot with salt for the macaroni. For some reason, I only ordered Diet Coke, which will probably make Penelope gag. Why didn't I get any juice?

She comes downstairs in my mother's red silk robe and joins me at the table where I set her plate and the choice of water or Diet Coke. She cracks open the can and I finally exhale.

"You don't have to talk about what happened," I say. "But you know what I'm going to ask."

"My mom died six months ago of lymphoma," Penelope says. "I don't know my dad."

"Well, you're fifteen," I say. "Not old enough to hold down a job that'll pay shit. It's inappropriate for you to live with me, because I would let you given the circumstance. So I'm not sure where we go from here, but you'll stay here until we figure things out."

The chicken tastes really good. Mother taught me to cook starting when I was ten. I wanted the attention, so I had to watch her in the kitchen until she finally had me take over. Before I left for school, I cooked for father after she died. Nothing I ever fried up tasted like what she cooked, though.

Penelope probably has plenty of memories of her mom, but I remember mother's back and diverted eyes more than her smile. After what happened with Damian, I doubt Penelope will ever smile the way she did before losing her mom.

"I have more men I have to kill," I say. "Are you fine staying here alone?"

"Sure. Why did you kill Damian, though?"

"Did you ever meet a Jonathan Zigler?"

"He came to the house a few times," She nods.

"He's kidnapped my girlfriend. I'm trying to pull his legs out from beneath him."

"So you're the reason Damian ran out of coke."

"Did he hurt you because of me?"

"No. He already hurt me."

She crushes the Diet Coke can and lays back. Looking at her green eyes, I can see why Damian might consider her almost pretty. By the time she's twenty, I'm sure she will be, but there's still a little baby fat on her cheeks and visible freckles giving the obvious indicators that she's not ripe yet. A single shot to Damian's head was too merciful, because I see how her soul's cut into pieces through her black pupils.

"Do you know Don Clark?" I ask.

"Sure," Penelope shrugs. "I've been to his house with Damian."

"He knows you?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think I could pass for your brother?"

"I can tell him you're my brother, but we don't look anything alike."

"We're both white, though."

Penelope throws on one of my mother's blouses, though she has to tuck it in a skirt that extends past her knees. Taking her along to Don's place feels more dangerous than leaving her alone here, but I need a better plan than waiting for him to come outside and shooting him.

To fight the silence, I put on the radio, and Penelope switches it to a station playing Led Zeppelin's "Hey Hey What Can I Do," which I haven't heard since 1978. My parents didn't like Zeppelin, and Al was more into Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. If I wanted to listen to Rock, I had to use father's old transistor handheld in my room. Sounded like a tiny band was playing on my dresser.

Don lives in a doublewide trailer on a gravel road with a camper covered in kudzu next to an empty shed that's begging for a forest fire to end it all. From the photo, I know he could be Hank Williams Junior's stunt double if he threw on shades and a black cowboy hat. Unlike Damian, he's outside on his porch steps smoking a cigarette in nothing but camo shorts he hasn't washed since the Carter Administration. How is this guy a successful coke dealer in Coweta County? He must really be the only one.

"Well, well," He spits on the gravel. "Is that my favorite rose comin' all the way out here to see me?"

"Hey Don," Penelope says. "This is my brother... Chuck."

"Hey there, Mr. Chuck," Don holds out his hand. "You must be taking miss Penelope back to Tampa. Kind of a shame. Guess she'll miss Damian's funeral."

Don's eyes squint up at us through the cigarette smoke. I shot Damian only a few hours ago, and I didn't know Zigler's dealers had such a tight network. He probably knows he's the last on my tour, but I don't see any weapons on him.

"Damian's funeral?" Penelope laughs. "I just said goodbye to him an hour ago, Don."

"Oh, it's been a little longer than all that," Don nods. "But if you or Mr. Chuck was the ones to pull the trigger, I can't say that I blame you. He wasn't right for what he did to you. But honey, you gotta come up with a better name than Chuck. Everybody knows that's short for Charles. Ain't that right, Mr. Price?"

I pull the revolver out and pull down the hammer, which makes Don chuckle and shake his head. Unless his bitch is inside with a shotgun ready to blast us or there's a secret redneck army in the woods, I don't know why he'd react that way.

"My coke's gone," He says. "I ran out two days ago. Whole county's dry."

"You think I killed David, Darius, and Damian for coke?"

"Shit, I don't know why you killed them, but all their supply went missing quick when you killed them."

"Zigler is who I'm after," I say. "I just have to make sure no one takes his place when he's dead."

"I see. I see. But you're doin' us all a favor. What Zigler would do to us is much worse."

"I hardly see how."

Don tosses his cigarette butt and stands up from the wooden stairs. Looking off into the woods, he smirks and points off. Glancing over, I see a deer walking on the pine straw and cones. The way Don takes satisfaction in this scene makes me reconsider shooting him for a moment.

"I bet you figured it'd be a fight," Don says. "You'd come out here with that little girl and I'd try to kill y'all. But I knew you'd be comin'. See, I got a family too. I told them to take off for the beach for the weekend. I got a wife and a son: Mildred and Phil. You know what's worse than losing your life, Mr. Price? Losing your job. Not being able to feed your family. God, you can see I ain't got much. David was the best of us. Damian was the worst. Now I'm the best and last left. Guess that makes me the worst too?"

"Are you stalling for something?" I ask.

Don spits and shakes his head. I might've left him alone if he hadn't gone on the dramatic monologue. Plus, how much better can his last words be? He admits his failure and acknowledges the coke industry isn't a party. That's beautiful, and I'd hate to let him fuck it up.

The gunshot scares off the deer. Penelope covers her mouth as she watches the blood seep onto the gray rocks beneath Don's head. Do we leave him here for Mildred and Phil to find? Getting our fingerprints everywhere seems like a bad idea, but I don't feel right leaving him here as a trauma balloon in his family's death parade.

"I don't see any neighbors around here," I say. "Can you help me get some kindling and straw?"

"No," Penelope says. "I can't do that to him."

"It's more dignified than leaving him here for an animal to eat."

Penelope shields her face as her whimpers finally overpower this apathetic mask she's worn since we met. I'd like to hold her and take her home, but my house isn't her home. She doesn't even have her own clothes. Taking her on as my responsibility isn't going to work. And before I stop myself, I need to end this.

Another shot rings out, and another person joins my body count. I think that makes eight people. As I walk back to the Ford, I picture how I should've reacted: face between my legs with my stomach convulsing as I screamed and cried. How did I become a murderer and such a monster? That's what I would've asked myself, but I don't feel like I'm a monster. Don deserved to die, and Penelope had nothing to live for. When someone discovers their bodies, I wouldn't be surprised if they shooed away vultures. The same bullets in their heads are in Damian too. The police aren't going to think a rich kid decided to play vigilante. These drug related murders are somehow justified in keeping Atlanta's children safe. If only the same hero had found Wayne Williams a few years ago. What a scary time to be alive.

The phone's ringing when I throw the car keys on the counter and grab a Diet Coke. I hope Al isn't calling, because I don't want to break down. If I hear a friendly voice, I'll only think of how I treated Penelope. Bringing her here and cooking dinner for us only to blow off her face. It felt right when I killed her, but that doesn't mean it was.

"Charles," Walter says, "You're really impressive. Do you know how long it's been since you last saw Nicole?"

"Lost count," I say.

"Five days. Only five days. You've done so well. Zigler is on his way home today. Would you like his address?"

"Obviously."

"You have two options, Charles. With his biggest dealers dead and the Cuba situation still unresolved, you have one more spot to wipe clean. He's got the last few blocks of uncut cocaine stowed away in his business front. Go there, destroy the place, and you'll please the master greatly. Or you can go to his house, get Nicole, and leave."

"You forgot the part where I kill Zigler."

"Right. You'll want to take care of him."

That's an interesting detail to forget. The entire point of killing those eight people and finding Nicole was so I could destroy Zigler's empire and then him. Why does Walter want me to burn some building full of cocaine down? Why not just kill Zigler and be done?

"What happens after this?" I ask. "When Zigler's dead."

"You'll go to law school, and work for me. You're going to be richer than your father ever was."

"Will I have to kill anyone else?"

"Charles, everyone has to die some way."

If I'd never met Nicole, I wouldn't be in this. Father would've died, I'd be content in my own house, go to law school, and never have to hurt anyone. I need to get out of this.

"I know you're afraid," Walter says. "There's more to this than money. Your life after death will be certain. There'll be no pain in your existence. You can do anything in this life you want and never suffer consequences. You may think you're stuck, but we're freeing you, Charles."

"Give me both addresses," I say.

Zigler has a printing press in Carrollton that creates annuals for schools and advertisements for local businesses. I'm guessing he's not the face of the company and customers never see him. It's an hour drive to Carrollton, and there's not a goddamn thing here.

Walter didn't say where Zigler was, but if he's on his way home from Cuba I'm wagering he's somewhere in Florida or near Valdosta. I have at least five hours. The printing press is my first stop, and I doubt this will take long.

The front of the building has reflective glass so I can't see inside, and the warehouse with a garage door is protected with a gate and barbed wire. Zigler probably has a security system installed as well. Walter said he wanted me to destroy the building, and I'm not sure where to start.

There're no street lights and nobody's driving around tonight. I saw signs for a college up the road, but a small town with a local college won't have much of a nightlife on the weekend. On the

next plot, another warehouse has a forklift parked outside. I can use that to break through the fence, surely.

Parking the Ford across the street on an empty plot, I walk across the street to the forklift and find the keys in the ignition. Surely even a little place like Carrollton has kids looking to take a joyride? The world's trust is my gain. So, I'm driving this snail up to the sidewalk and pushing through the fence, but the chain doesn't break. Instead, the wire pops over my head, and the poles tilt over. My foot clenches against the accelerator as the tires seem to run in place as if I'm driving on ice.

When the fence finally falls, the engine dies. If someone drives by now, I'm fucked. Pulling the small propane tank from the forklift, I limp up to the garage door and my spine somehow doesn't break when I climb up to break the lock with the tank.

There's a room as big as a small ranch house with an office in the corner. A printing machine that could cripple an elephant sits in the middle of it all. Assuming that the coke is in the office, I open the door to see a deer head on the wall, a TV set with a Nintendo, and a cluttered desk. A collection of Franz Kafta's short stories sits next to a framed photo of David and Zigler holding glass Pepsi bottles and smiling like a newlywed couple.

I figured Nicole fucked Zigler at some point. A guy with his style and perfect hair with his arm wrapped around David's waist probably doesn't like to fuck girls. He's the perfect Bond villain.

Opening a coat closet, I see four blocks of cocaine stashed without even a garbage bag to obscure them. If you dropped one of these on someone's head, they'd have a closed casket funeral. Dragging them out to the main floor, I stack the file folders on the desk next to the bricks and crumple some paper to start a fire. I could just pour bleach on them, but I apparently have to take down the whole building or cause significant damage. Before shutting the office door, I crank open the propane tank and use a cashmere winter coat I found in the closet to pad the bottom of the door.

Running outside, I don't want to stick around to see the explosion because I have no idea if this'll work. When I pass the forklift and broken fence, I hear a loud pop and wood smashing open. Like an idiot ready for a cop car to pull up and arrest me, I go back inside to discover the thin wall between the office and the main floor on fire. White powder forms a cloud around the flames, so I accomplished something today.

Once I'm back in the Ford, I don't want to wait to see the inevitable fire truck arrive, so I head toward the college. Zigler apparently lives near a country club across the street from the school, and my palms grip the wheel like I'm climbing a mountain each time I think of Nicole. Will I really see her again tonight?

It's possible she'll meet the same fate as Penelope. I went through all of this for Nicole, yet I worry what we'll become as a result. You can't end a relationship with so much blood between two bodies.

At the end of a cul-de-sac, a house that would make Gomez Adams cream his pants sits amongst many open lots. This community isn't quite developed as if Zigler has the entire street reserved for his mini-mansion. There's not a wrought iron fence or anything blocking passersby from the driveway. Unfortunately, I can't park in a neighbors lot because he doesn't have any.

Since it's dark on the inside, I assume no one's home. Did Zigler leave Nicole here alone? Could she be in a deserted cabin or buried in an unmarked grave? With my shotgun in hand, I push the 9mm in my left pocket and the revolver in the right. I leave the car parked in the backyard so he doesn't see that anyone's here.

Looking in the back window, I see a master bedroom with a king bed and a love seat across from a TV. Further down, there's a back door with glass panels. I press my foot against the one nearest to the knob and it pops out onto the carpet. The inside is cold from the air conditioning, which must be turned down to fifty-eight degrees.

I expected a couple of goons with pistols to appear, but Zigler doesn't appear to have any henchmen tonight. Probably followed him to Cuba. When he's back in town, he'll probably stop by the print shop to see my new destruction. I keep wanting to hear a car pull up, but it's quieter than Charlie Chaplin's asshole.

When I try the knob to what I assume is the basement, the door's locked. If I knock or call down, someone upstairs might hear me. The handle has a hole for a skeleton key, so I might be able to pry it open with a butter knife or credit card.

As I open the drawers looking for the silverware, I smell smoke. A figure is forming next to the locked door, and I have this punching feeling in my stomach because this has to be another nightmare. Walter's so-called master takes form in front of me while I slap myself in the knuckles with a knife to make sure I'm awake.

"It's almost over," He says.

Stepping out of the fog, the master lays down a paper and quill with an ink bottle. Pushing over the form with his middle finger, he beckons for me to join him at the kitchen table.

"Do you know my name, human?"

"I didn't know if you were real or not," I say. "But I'm not sure I want to say it out loud. It'll sound psychotic."

"This contract effectively seals your fate," He says. "You'll have a happy life with your girlfriend and a comfortable place in my domain for your servitude."

This guy wants me to say that he's the Devil, but does such a being exist? How else can I examine my nightmares? He's clearly not human and from another realm. Such thoughts make me wonder if I'm dead and this is a death dream.

"Do I call you Lucifer?" I ask.

"My name is Lucifer, but all humans address me as Satan."

"And what happens when I sign my soul away?"

"I'll unlock that door, and Nicole will be on the other side. You'll deal with Zigler and take her home. I do have certain quantifiers, though."

"Such as?"

"Your first born will serve our purpose in the war against humanity. We'll time your child's birth with the death of a specific man. This will guarantee your heir's place in the Trinity."

"Trinity?"

"Arthur Lindsay is one third of the Trinity. Once he kills the oldest in the Trinity, your son or daughter will take their place."

He's saying I am serving in a war, but I don't believe it's anything but a ploy against God. My offspring won't truly belong to me. He's dictating my future, and that's the opposite of freedom. I'll be his slave.

"When you say comfortable," I say, "Do you mean I won't burn in Hell?"

"There are many sections in my domain. Those who serve themselves burn. Those who serve me relish all of their sins for eternity."

If only I had more time to mull it over. Stare out the window at the sunset with a drink in my hand. Listen to Genesis on my CD player in my underwear. Eat Chinese takeout under dim lighting with chop sticks while watching the eleven o'clock news. Stuff people do in movies to avoid their problems but act like they're thinking.

If I sign, I get Nicole. What else can I do? Walk out of here and leave Atlanta? It's not like I can run from the Devil. I'm selling my soul, but what does that mean? What is my soul? Until I discovered the existence of God and Satan a moment ago, I figured my body was my only vessel. What does Satan want with my soul?

"Why do you want me?" I ask.

"Everything since David has been a test," He says. "I've wanted to remedy the Zigler situation for a while. Since he is under contract with me, I cannot break it. However, you're human and have free will. You took every scenario Walter gave you and invented the solutions. I don't need someone to take orders from him. You'll be his right hand until Murray is of age."

"Murray?"

"Murray is the result of Walter and a human woman we used and discarded once he was born. I created Walter when I realized technology would enslave mankind one day. Murray will take over the company you build, and humans will fall under his watch."

"He's the Antichrist?"

"Yes," Lucifer nods. "I've tried many times to eliminate your kind. Zigler is the result of my own failure. Unlike Zigler, you were able to stop consuming this poison. You're a man of mind rather than a lustful heart."

Everything out of his mouth might be a lie, but Satan makes me out to be better than I am. How am I capable of jumpstarting the apocalypse? I can't even fry an egg without breaking the yolk. But with all that power, I'll never have to cook again. Maybe I can save Nicole from herself and we'll be on the right side of this war.

"If I sign," I say, "You'll protect me?"

"I promise you'll live until the end."

"That's in the contract?"

"If I break it, I lose your soul. You'll go to Heaven. There's no way to lose, Charles."

Taking the quill and dipping it in the ink, my wrist glides against the paper and my name appears on the bottom line. I let out a heavy breath as Satan takes the contract from the table and points at the door, which opens with a slight creak.

"I didn't allow Zigler to hurt her," Satan says. "You'll find she's merely in a daze."

"Thank you," I say, "Master."

Satan bows his head and darkens into the shadows. Grabbing my shotgun, I walk over to the doorway and look down the stairwell. I can't hear anything but the veins in my head reminding me I'm alive. This is what I killed for, and I'm hesitant to finally accept my prize. I was going to leave her at home and never speak to her again. Now we're going to create some superhuman slave together.

On an iron twin bed, Nicole rests her blonde head facing the concrete wall. I pull back the ornate black and white quilt to reveal her pale face. When we first met, her intelligent gaze and slender build made me so hard. The way she didn't instantly fall for me yet took me on this journey made me love her. Right now, I'd like to go back and relive that first week on an endless loop.

Laying my shotgun on the floor, I sit next to her and kiss a gaunt cheek. She exhales and takes in a sharp breath before opening her eyes and laying those blue irises on my face. I must look like a homeless shithouse rat roaming around looking for a fresh bucket of piss to swim in.

"Why are all of my dreams this way?" She asks.

"I need you to get up," I say. "I'm going to take you home."

"You're really here," She smiles.

"Let's get upstairs before Zigler gets home."

A door upstairs slams shut. I guess I took too long to sign away my soul. A couple of muffled voices precede the footsteps coming down here. Grabbing the shot gun, I load a shell into the chamber and await whoever enters the room.

I let off a round before realizing I just shot a black man with his hands in the air. His eyes widen and grow still in an instant. Before the blood pools around him, Jonathan Zigler appears with a German pistol aimed at me. I've got a shell left inside, but I'll have to cock this damned thing first.

"Love your suit," I say.

"I have a Bermuda hat to match," Zigler says. "I'm sorry you couldn't see it."

He fires at me, and the bullet forces me on my ass as my mind seems to run in a circle because I'm going to die. But I look down at my chest and a flattened bullet falls out of my shirt. Arthur probably felt the same way when he went to Korea and had children and teenage boys firing at him. This is what it's like to be bulletproof, yet I still feel a bruise forming above my nipple.

Zigler falls face first to the ground when I blow his legs out. Tossing the shotgun aside, I pull out the 9mm and aim down at the well-bred asshole. This is our final battle scene, yet it's ending so quickly.

"What an idiot."

He stands and reveals he's not bleeding either. Walking to me, he grabs me by the wrist and the pistol falls from my hand. How am I supposed to kill him if we're both unable to shoot each other?

"You've signed away your soul for nothing," Zigler says. "That girl behind you isn't worthy of a footnote in my story. You're not worthy of a passing glance."

"Are you just going to make catty remarks all night?"

Head butting Peter Pan, I force all of my body weight onto his chest and grab his right thigh so we fall to the floor. The impact knocks the wind out of me and I'm coughing over him as Zigler

claws at my face. Grabbing his German pistol, I whip him across that sharp face and ram the handle into his eye.

"Charles, move!" Nicole cries behind me.

I roll off the pale bastard and hear the revolver that fell out of my pants make a deafening blast that rattles my eardrums. Zigler reaches up for Nicole, who shoots him back to the ground. There's a bag of concrete next to the washer and dryer, which I haul over my shoulder and throw onto Zigler's chest. As he's trying to push the bag off, I sit down on him and motion for Nicole to hand me father's gun.

"I'll spend all night trying to kill you," I say. "I don't care if I have to tie you up and throw you into a river."

"And when I swim to shore, I'll follow you until the end, boy."

"Nicole, find some rope and tie up his legs."

"Your whore will taste the leather of my shoe."

"Nevermind," I say. "I'll just end this now."

Reaching down to his eyelid, I force the muzzle of the revolver onto his open eye and pull the trigger. Blood spews in my face and mouth, and I almost puke from the taste of pennies and period juice. I turn over in the floor and shout out to Jesus, but that's the most vain plea I'll ever make.

Nicole pulls the blanket from the bed and wipes the fluid from my forehead and cheeks. I spit out as much as I can before she gives me a bottle of flat Perrier, which I use to swish around my gums and I spew it on Zigler's corpse.

"I shouldn't complain about you being sloppy," She says.

"I just killed Darth Vader and you're calling me sloppy."

"And I would kiss you, but blood's on your lips."

NERO: Avenging New America

2130

I should've reenlisted like my Dad. Instead, I followed a woman to Portland and somehow ended up back in Atlanta. The house I grew up in didn't even leave a mark in the grass. After selling my property in Austin, I'm far from homeless. I definitely shouldn't be on the street tonight. Wearing all black as if that make me less suspicious. Having to duck under most doorways means people notice me no matter what I have on.

Kyair raised me to fight. Unlike the other two in the Trinity, I don't have as many blood stains. Almost letting Kyair drown in pig guts or blowing up the GM plant obviously makes me a bit problematic. Both times, my rationale couldn't see every move before someone made it. I underestimated Dad. I got too invested in the idea of Serra. Overall, I'm not bright, but I'm built better than most. I don't have to be smart because I can break a man's bones when he tries to use reason with me. I can stand in the middle of an army firing until their magazines empty and start choking them out one by one. Why am I not a rabid serial killer? Because Dad taught me killing is wrong even if he didn't follow that rule himself.

What am I accomplishing tonight? Crime in Atlanta didn't stop just because we took out a mobster and a few demons. Unlike Birch, I don't want to let Evil fester because people have free will to take or perpetuate lives.

Now I need an antagonist. Perhaps a rogue gallery? But what trouble comes out on the street? Aren't all the real Evil men behind tall windows in big buildings or weighing their product on coffee tables?

The thing about Atlanta police is they don't give a fuck. They put up the yellow tape around crime scenes for their coffee breaks. Maybe they were more proactive in old America. I only see them when it's time to vote. Otherwise, they're not patrolling our lives. For some people, that's freedom. What about protection? People who survived to see New America didn't need protection. That was forty-five years ago, though.

Theories like Cause and Effect or the Monkey's Paw apply here. Just because one gang failed in 2127 and Jamron killed Serra doesn't mean the end of Evil. The flaw in God's plan for the Trinity was the inevitable response from the populace. It's sort of like building a bigger army which results in the enemy building a bigger army. Because I exist, someone wants to be my nemesis. Every night, I come out to meet them.

Most people don't go out at night. They stay at home with their Haptic Masks for entertainment and go to bed. Businesses close right before the sunsets. Even bars can't stay open long into the darkness. When nothing's open, there's not much reason to leave home unless there's a medical emergency. If you're hungry and don't have anything to eat, you have to wait until morning. Drink a glass of water and sit it out.

So when I'm walking the sidewalk in a black hoodie, the few people outdoors take notice. Since the police aren't patrolling the streets, that leaves a special kind of person unaccounted for in Atlanta.

While the bars turn their open neon signs off, their backrooms remain lit. I'm not a master of disguise who can blend into the poker crowd, but I have money. Since people don't want to drink unless they can't afford a Haptic Mask, bars tend to make their bank through liquor sales for the illegal gambling crowd. Do I want to bust open this black market of sin? My interest remains in those dangerous to humanity, and the unshaven Bukowski clones aren't pushing old ladies off balconies.

"What'll it be, big guy?" The dealer asks.

"I'm going to raise a hundred," I say.

Two of the guys at the table toss their cards and do the typical sighing. Games tend to end early because I'm the only one able to put up this kind of green. The ones looking to make enough to cover their tab aren't the kind I'm after.

"I'll call."

"Big guy?" The dealer asks.

"Let's go."

I have a two of hearts, four of clubs, queen of spades, and king of diamonds. The hand opposite mine is a flush. He doesn't even smirk when he pulls in the chips.

"May I ask the name of the man who beat me?" I ask.

"Dhani," He says.

He's not wearing a suit or gold watch, but Dhani doesn't look like he lives on the street either. With a thrift shop bowling shirt and wrinkled khakis, I'm surprised he doesn't work at the bar. He and I are the only ones not sucking on a mug of beer.

"Another hand?" I offer.

Dhani walks off without acknowledging the gesture. I follow and the barflies avert their attention since my shadow seems to take up half the room. After Dhani crosses the street to the gravel parking lot, I see he has the only car on the entire block: A GM Aedes.

Considering someone able to call my bet and afford a car wouldn't normally be in a backroom poker game, I don't have a terrible moral dilemma when I pull Dhani out of the car and get a good look at his unibrow in the street light. Such a hairy dude. Kinda short too.

"Who's your bank?" I ask.

"Fuck off," Dhani tries reaching for the pistol poking out from the driver's seat.

"If you want to shoot me and wake everyone in the neighborhood up..."

I stand Dhani up against the car and hand him the gun. With my arms open and my eyes wide, Dhani could kill me if I wasn't part of the Trinity. He goes as far as loading a bullet into the chamber, but just stares at me with his finger on the trigger.

"What you want, man?" He asks.

"To know where you got the money for this car," I say. "You think I lost that hand on accident?"

"Well turn around and walk away," Dhani says, "And I won't kill you."

"You're too afraid of what might happen if you shoot that gun."

"Oh yeah? Then come at me and make it easier."

If we struggle for the gun, he might shoot himself. I once saw a guy accidently shoot his friend in the head when I surprised them. Sure, I'm not a murderer, but the blood stained my clothes just the same.

"Dhani," I say, "If you shoot me, nothing's going to happen. Well, nothing will happen to me."

"What are you like Birch or something? He ain't real."

"Birch fucks my ex-girlfriend. I am Nero."

Standing in front of the barrel, I force Dhani to hold the gun against my chest by grabbing his wrist, and I squeeze until he lets go and the metal clinks against the gravel. Kicking the pistol away, I pinch the muscle between his neck and shoulder while leading him into the car.

"Wherever you're going," I get in the passenger side, "Take me too."

2131

Detective Easton walks me through the rows of desks with their refurbished typewriters and dented metal frames toward his office. There's a rotting smell, though I can't trace the source. He lights an apple pie scented candle while apologizing. Apparently, that smell is why I'm here.

"Normally," Easton says, "Government protocol for murder investigations is seven days before we have to close the case as unsolved."

"How many get solved before the seven days?" I ask.

"Maybe half," Easton says. "We don't have the manpower or budget to go beyond the seventh day. New American people tend to prefer finding justice their own way. I suppose that's why you exist, huh?"

"Most people ain't like me," I say.

"I have old books that survived the dark period," He says, "Written by psychologists and FBI about why people kill. The serial killer was rare then, but now... This is my first."

Easton opens a binder and shows me instant photographs of various limbs in boxes. They aren't bloody and decayed. There's a plastic appearance to them as they look shiny and free of any blood.

"Atlanta either has a vampire cult," Easton says, "Or a cannibal who likes to vacuum seal his prey. We get a new box addressed to me every day with a body part."

"Someone is mailing you their victims?" I ask.

"No heads or torsos," He says. "No hearts or other organs. Just the arms and legs one by one. Whoever they are is taunting us."

"I'm guessing you already checked with the post office?"

"They're using an old video cassette surveillance system. And nobody has seen who is dropping off the boxes."

It's too easy to commit a crime now. While we're not a rich country full of millionaires, New America doesn't let people starve or sleep in the cold. People don't steal too often because they're going to bed with full bellies. Once they buy a Haptic Mask, they can go anywhere in their heads without needing a mansion. Someone would have to be pretty bored to go around killing people and go to the trouble to mail the evidence.

"Have you staked out the post office?" I ask.

"We have an officer posted," Easton says, "But he hasn't even seen someone bring in a box that big."

Then who's to say it isn't someone working at the post office? Maybe the post man himself delivers his victims' limbs? Hell, it could be someone in the mail room at the Atlanta Police Department. Easton is a professional and should've already followed these trails.

"We identified the last set of prints on a hand," Easton says. "One of our own. They're not only a vampire; they're a cop killer. I don't want my force afraid to do their jobs. That's why I called. Per the law, I have to ignore the dead people being put on my desk now."

There's an evidence room full of these packages. Smells like someone tried to cook a baby in a hot car. None of the boxes have return addresses, each has a post mark signifying it was handled in the post office, and cut up newspaper provides a decorative cushion for the deceased memorabilia.

Detective Easton doesn't cover his nose or indicate the aroma bothers him, but he's pale like an anemic child with a clean shaven face and dull brown eyes. Doesn't look like he even served in the military per government regulation, but I see his dog tag ID tattooed on his left wrist.

"Where haven't you looked?" I ask.

"I personally went through the post office and interviewed everyone. We kept the delivery woman in an interrogation room for eight hours. I watched their VHS footage. The boxes appear, they get processed like regular mail, and they show up here. Per the law..."

"They have to deliver it," I say. "Right."

As I'm trying to imagine how a person sneaks a box this big into the post office every week day without anyone noticing, Easton nudges me to leave the room with him. I suppose there are multiple angles. Figuring out how this person vacuums out the blood and disposes of it might be a start, but the answer seems to obviously be the post office. That could be a purposeful misdirect, though.

"Everything I've told you is all I know," Easton says. "If you don't find them, at least we tried."

"I'm not a witty investigator," I say. "People might even say I'm dumb."

"A dumbass wouldn't admit to being dumb."

Few people own vacuums of any sort because most apartments and homes have either concrete or wood flooring. Those who can afford antique rugs usually hang them outside and hit them with a broom. Besides, a vacuum cleaner you'd buy in a store wouldn't be able to soak up any blood without the engine burning up.

Of course, people go missing. With teleportation, you can go anywhere and start over. Change your name and be a new person. The population isn't so dense that no one wouldn't notice their boyfriend, bag girl, beer distiller, or convenience clerk went missing. Even poor houses keep tabs on everyone who sleeps there.

The scenario seems improbable. Then I stop in front of the post office and realize that without the heads, organs, or torsos, we don't know if these people are dead. Anyone can survive without their arms and legs. Thus, I can't confirm this is a serial killer.

How would someone be able to house a bunch of limbless people, though? Again, I come back to the vacuum. They either have money or resources. They definitely have space.

Until I can figure that out, I have to stop the mail. A small bomb in the lobby would necessitate a closure without harming anyone if I do it at night. Maybe a bomb threat? An officer stationed at the post office isn't going to deter anyone, and there's a possibility the culprit sneaks inside another way. Hell, they could be bringing in the body parts in another container and building a cardboard shipping box inside.

The Atlanta post office is right by what used to be Spaghetti Junction and a courthouse. Now there are abandoned buildings and incomplete bridges from old America. I'm able to get to the courthouse roof with a digital camera I bought off an antiques dealer that's supposed to hold enough memory for ten hours of footage.

Like Easton said, there's a cop stationed near the entrance. He could see me if he only looked up far enough. If this were 2095, I could slash all the mail truck tires, but all mail carriers

work on foot. Bigger packages, like dismembered body parts, are delivered later in the day one by one. Since there's a teleportation terminal in the post office, they don't have to travel far.

This camera and the cop are useless if someone figured out how to teleport into the post office, though. Mail carriers have badges they scan to enter the coordinates. Now, getting a mail carrier's ID badge wouldn't be an issue, and now I'm realizing that I could stop this for a while if I disabled Atlanta's teleportation terminals.

I leave the camera and climb down to my GM Sarmenti. Unlike most Americans, I can afford a car and even painted mine matte black. Disabling the teleportation terminals won't keep people from walking, but we don't have any other public transportation. If the limbless bandit has the money to possibly house a bunch of living torsos, then they probably have a car too.

Mansor Sean designed the teleportation system as a network, but each town has servers with private security guards. Now, I can pull up in my unique black car and politely ask them to let me in so I can temporarily cause panic in the city, but they're not likely to forget me. I don't want to hurt them, and I'm definitely not going to kill them, though I need them out of the way.

The bomb wasn't a bad idea. I can duct tape a couple of flashbangs together and cause a distraction. The Sean server room resides in an outlet mall now strictly kept as a public transportation hub not far from Jefferson Tate. Unlike the post office cop, there's an armored truck, several guys with bullet proof vests, and lots of refurbished AR-15s.

None of them can shoot me, but they might accidently shoot one another. I also don't want to risk actual damage to the servers. Coming at night won't do any good because the guards work in shifts. My bomb idea will only make them trigger happy.

"May I ask your business here, sir?" The guard asks at the gate.

"I'm here for monthly server maintenance," I say.

"The servers are maintained remotely," He says.

He holds up his rifle when I open my car door, so I pull the barrel to my right shoulder and force the butt into his chest. After he hits the ground, I toss the gun into my open car window and pull him up like a sack of potatoes and haul him past the gate where his colleagues take notice with their identical rifles.

"Oh hello," I say. "Could you clear a path for me?"

"Put Grizzard down or we fire," One says.

"Is that actually your name?" I ask the guard hanging over my shoulder.

One of them fires a warning shot as if we weren't trained to remain calm during gunfire in the New American Army. I'm clearly an able-bodied man who served. The educational system isn't tremendous, but I thought I lacked common sense.

"Obviously, if one of you shoots at me, you might hit Grizzard."

As I walk closer, some of them back away and the stubborn ones are close enough for me to toss Grizzard at them like a log. Thankfully, no one decides to shoot at me, so I turn around to get back into my car.

"Where is this fuck going?" One of them asks.

The sound of the guards and Grizzard wrestling around makes me laugh, though I doubt they see the humor in throwing a grown man into human bowling pins. They're running after me by

the time I reach my car, so I grab the rifle I stole from Grizzard and aim straight up. Ironically, they cower and try to find cover.

I'm not certain why my investigation of a potential murderer turned into a comedy sketch. They all move out of the way when I hit my accelerator and head for the steel doors that protect the Sean servers from idiots like me.

Sure, my car takes damage and I bounce into the steering wheel, but I manage to nudge the doors off their hinges. My best buddies run for me with their guns drawn, though they shouldn't fire anywhere near the servers.

"Can you guys keep an eye out for me?" I ask as I climb out of the car.

"Head shot, you dumb fucks!" Grizzard shouts.

Grizzard is clearly the football player who said *bad game* whenever players slapped each other's hands after a loss. Apparently, my demonstration wasn't enough to tell them why they shouldn't fuck with me. Rather than display decorum, the six men who still retain their guns start unloading their clips at me. Of course, there's no way some bullets don't go through the doorway and cause server damage.

None of them bother reloading while I'm still standing. Now, I'd like to keep this peaceful and avoid conflict, but I grab Grizzard by the face and slam him to the asphalt. One of the guards tries prying me off him, which turns out to be a mistake because he joins Grizzard on the ground.

"I don't know if you've figured it out yet," I say, "But I could easily kill all seven of you. Leave me alone."

"Why are you even here?" One asks.

"I was bored, I guess."

The servers are still bleeping and blooping with their blinking lights, so I look around for the emergency cut off switch. In the event servers overheat when the A/C malfunctions or whatever, the switch prevents the motherboards from melting. Pulling the glass cover from the key stuck into the wall, I turn the lock and the room goes quiet.

I realize someone can come back in here and turn the switch back on, so I pocket the key and walk around to find the power switcher for the building. I'm not sure how much time this will buy me or stop the post office from delivering mail, but I'd rather not play dominos with the servers and permanently damage Atlanta's public transportation infrastructure.

Pulling out my wallet as I return to the guards, who clearly never had their asses kicked while holding automatic rifles, I offer Grizzard a one-hundred dollar gold credit. He snatches the money from my hand before giving me the confused response typical of someone being bribed. Each of them accepts their bribes and I have their attention without the gun play. I might've led with the money instead of fighting them. Now I feel bad for Grizzard.

"Gentlemen," I say, "I'm asking something big. No one should turn those servers back on for forty eight hours. In two days from today, I will return to turn them back on. If anyone asks, there's a glitch. You guys know what a glitch means?"

"We got it," Grizzard says.

"Well, it was a pleasure whipping your asses."

The Atlanta news on Channel 2 doesn't cover the weather, local schools doing fundraisers, someone turning seventy, or a new bakery opening up in downtown. Nobody can teleport into Atlanta, so businesses and travelers are pissy. In a city where few people own cars, no one is excited about having to walk far.

As the words coming out of the TV turn to background noise, I stretch my legs and close my eyes. Sometimes I actually make it to my bed before falling asleep. The only thing on TV that isn't the boring news hour is old shows from before 2033. It's been forty-six years since New America took form and the electricity came back. No one values the television anymore.

The phone in my kitchen rings. I pick up the receiver on my right and involuntarily groan as I crawl out of twilight. Detective Easton's voice sounds like it's coming from a long tunnel until my brain catches up with my ears.

"The police who responded to the report of gunfire," Easton says, "Told the chief that none of Sean's private arms men would say what happened. They were already fixing the doors you broke off the hinges when the cops showed up."

"Sorry," I say, "What?"

"Why did you think it was a good idea to disable the teleport terminals in Atlanta, Nero?"

"I'm not saying I did, but the other ideas I had weren't as good. Essentially, we need to disrupt the postal service for the next two days. Shit, I just remembered."

I need to go change the memory card in my camera. Driving anywhere in a dinged up car is asking for the police to pull me over. Thankfully, I have more than one car. Such is the luxury of dealing in real estate years ago.

"Tell your posted man to go home," I say. "We have to keep the area around the post office clear."

"What are you thinking?" Easton asks. "Nero, I've been skeptical about you for a while now. The APD doesn't like outsiders messing around with our cases. The only reason I contacted you was to fix what we can't with government restrictions. People are getting chopped into pieces."

"I'm not much of a thinker."

Despite not having internet access in New America, computers aren't obsolete. I built my own, though microchips produced by Genetic Motors cost more than twenty Haptic Masks. The footage on the SD card climaxes when I managed to disable the teleportation servers.

A few postal workers walk outside and look around as if trying to ascertain if there's a blackout or lightning bolts from Heaven. Thirty minutes later, a man in a suit, whose features appear blurry in the image, opens the door for everyone in the building to file out before he locks the door.

Surely whoever that man is knows about the mailed arms and legs. People aren't entirely stupid. When potential murderers lurk around, this sort of event informs them that someone is either inhibiting the perpetrator or terrorizing Atlanta. Either way, the best way to avoid harm is to close the post office until the teleportation terminals function again. Plus, a lot of those people have long walks home.

I only have an hour left to swap the SD card in the camera again this morning. Should I make my scrambled eggs or climb on the courthouse roof on an empty stomach? It's not like if I fall, I'll break my skull open.

Unlike my matte black GM, the red 2006 Ford Mustang I restored in Portland possesses a lot less stealth. Even without gasoline, the engine rattles every man's testicles in a mile radius. No man or woman lurks around the post office, which makes the fog and overcast sky that much more poignant.

The battery on the camera is almost out. Further proof that I'm a dumbass is I didn't bring a backup. As I'm knelt over, a shrill tone from below makes me look up. There's a black Cadillac Escalade coming down the road. I saw one in Austin, but it wasn't running. Didn't even have tires.

Stopping in front of the post office, a woman with gray hair and loud black boots crosses over to the entrance and looks inside. This might be my new friend. Should I call her the lopper? Barbie Doll Killer?

She doesn't spook when I land on my feet from a three story fall. If she's armed, then she already knows it won't do any good. I'm not a fan of mace or stun guns, though. I peek in the tinted rear window to see a shipping box. Perhaps the best camouflage is gender? People suspect men of evil deeds, but rarely do they even notice a woman driving a restored Cadillac.

"License plate RT674QP," I say. "Pretty random for a county with less than two-hundred privately owned vehicles."

"I wondered when I'd get to meet you, Nero," She says.

The dramatic music intensifies. The camera zooms into my shocked face. She thinks saying my name drops a bomb. Although, her knowing who I am doesn't bode well for my eyes if she has pepper spray.

"People in my circles are saying your name a lot," She approaches me.

"Says a lot about your circles," I say. "My dad always said you are who you hang with."

"Are you intending to see me hang?"

"I would hold you here and call the police," I say, "But for some reason I think there's more than one person sawing off people's limbs now."

"Because I'm a woman?" She asks. "I must be part of a cannibalistic cult who are eating people and discarding them to taunt the police."

"Just because you joke about it doesn't make it untrue," I say.

Up close, she's not purposefully dying her hair gray as a fashion statement. The leather skirt, black cashmere sweater, and oversized sunglasses betray her as wealthy, but also terribly behind the times.

"You're too curious to turn me in," She says. "You want to see where I do it."

"Alright, then," I knock on her car. "Drive me."

Something about my plan worked out too well. If I weren't in the Trinity, getting in a car with a murderer wouldn't be smart, but I'm aware of my limitations. Despite the possible ramifications, I'm resigned to seeing this through.

Pulling out the wallet in her purse, I look for an ID. Next to a photo of her with darker hair is the name McCord, Lily. Born forty-one years ago in 2090. I've heard the name McCord before, but where? The former CEO of Genetic Motors was Gentry McCord, but he passed away in 2128. All Atlanta motor vehicle production ceased around 2096 and they solely manufactured Haptic Masks.

"Any relation to Gentry McCord?" I hold up the ID.

"You mean my father?" Lily asks.

"Wow," I say. "I guess you got bored with all your money."

"Pretty soon, everyone is going to be bored, Nero. The Haptic Mask can only hold our interest for a short while. Everyone is going to take it off one day and thirst for something more."

"Are you blaming over-saturation for murder?" I ask.

"Not just murder. People will steal for the thrill. Jump off bridges to feel something real."

"Good thing I'm here," I say.

"The Trinity is outdated, Nero. New America has outgrown you."

With that logic, so did old America. 2033 was the one time the Trinity came together to protect Earth from Evil. If not for Murray Groaan reviving the Trinity, I wouldn't be in this car now. What use am I to New America if not to protect them from the people stealing their limbs? The Evil ones need to know someone can stop them. The Good ones should know the due process; that our justice system might need more than a few days to solve their crimes.

"You're right," I say. "That's why I'm not the one who's going to punish you."

Lily parks on the street outside a concrete building with kudzu and weeds providing the force field from suspicion. We approach the building, but I stay a few paces behind her with my ears open for anyone else who might try to sneak around me.

After unlocking a deadbolt and padlock, Lily creaks the door open to reveal what used to be a slaughterhouse. Rather than lots of pig carcasses floating on hooks, there's a long metal table with a meat grinder and hose leading to an industrial sized vacuum. Red and brown stains encircle a drain where I presume she removes the appendages.

Tied with rusted barbed wire to a metal chair is a broad chested man whose only remaining limb is his left arm. He croaks something. Lily walks over to a cabinet and returns with a water bottle she squeezes into her prey's mouth. She rubs through his salt-and-pepper hair and straightens his mustache like a wife to her husband before he leaves for work.

"As you see, Nero," Lily says, "Bonasis here won't have a quality of life worth a damn after what I've done."

"After what you've done," I say. "You're asking me to let you kill him. I can't let another life go because you deem someone unworthy of life."

"In this water," She says, "Is a sedative. I put them all out before surgery."

She's drugging Bonasis now, but I won't stop her. Instead, I study the meat grinder and discover that she's definitely killing her victims. She made the cannibalism crack, but the best way to get rid of meat is for something to eat it.

"If you're not eating them," I ask, "Who is?"

"I have two Dobermans," Lily says. "Dog food is so expensive, you know?"

"Why?"

Bonasis nods off. With a wink and smile, Lily turns the water bottle up as she chugs the remnants. She tosses the empty canister to the floor before I can stop her. Holding her jaw, I try to force my fingers down her throat, but she bites down. While I'm not into hitting women, I'd say anyone should be able to hit someone in the face if they've murdered multiple people.

She purges with a wet cough onto the concrete floor. I reach over to feel Bonasis's pulse, and he's already gone. Why did I believe her about the sedative? I should've saved him first. Not that I'm guilt ridden about not forcing a nearly dead man to throw up.

"To think I was going to visit you in prison," I say.

Despite that I get to watch Detective Easton put the handcuffs on her and reach the same conclusions about Lily's victims, I lean against the Escalade and look up at the white sky. The police never considered handling this case as I did. Nobody suggested shutting down the postal service for a couple of days. Easton stationed a man there, but that amounted to more men dying.

Once Lily departs in her new black and white carriage with Atlanta's finest, Easton looks at me from his car and back at the slaughterhouse before waving me over. Somehow his skin looks gray in the dimming light.

"She said Bonasis was already gone before you showed up," Easton says.

"I'll vouch for that," I say.

"I guess the next time Atlanta has a serial killer, I'll call you before the seven days are over. You know, I wasn't sure, but you're a good guy, Nero."

I nod and step back so Easton can pull out. As soon as I get in the Escalade, I'm headed to the Sean server room. Next time Atlanta has a serial killer, I hope I'm dead. In reality, I know that once the news picks up on me helping APD, I'm bringing more legitimacy to the Trinity. People will recognize me. Some might decide to run. Others will want to test me.

Birch made references to superheroes. One night, I caught a Batman movie on TV. Whoever the guy with the green hair is, I think they call him the Joker, exists because of Batman. Without Batman fighting the mob and bank robbers, the city only has the police to deal with criminals. The Joker is a response to Batman, and he's only the start.

With all the power Birch has, I didn't know why he prefers seclusion until now. When Easton said there will be another serial killer, there was a tinge in his tone that suggested it'll be worse. Had I stayed in Portland or moved to Austin with my head down, maybe Lily wouldn't be in that police car. Because Batman created the Joker, all of the Joker's actions reflect Batman. Of course, the Joker keeps getting out of the insane asylum and Batman chases him back down.

More eyes on me means more people acknowledging the Trinity, which leads directly to Birch. At some point, he has to end my life. Nothing pisses him off like an invasion of privacy.

2132

Holding Joaquin against the wall, his smile only intensifies when his head hits the brick. Behind me are the three girls he kidnapped. Their exposed rib cages and gaunt cheeks make them unrecognizable from the photos I saw at the police station. Before last year, I'd never encountered someone depraved like this. New America doesn't breed murderers and rapists. People do their jobs, go home to their families, and the cycle continues.

He's speaking, but his words are unintelligible through his laughter. I could give a shit what he has to say. While the sight of seeing their captor pressed against the floor with my foot baring down on his neck might traumatize these girls, I doubt Joaquin spending his life in a prison cell brings them any solace. When I first saw them, the bruises and red marks reminded me of seeing a one armed man unable to even plead for his life last year. Despite the physical damage, these girls can still live their lives. They'll have the memory of Joaquin taunting them for decades, though.

"Girls," I say, "I need one of you to call the police. There's a telephone on the wall downstairs. Can one of you do that for me?"

The tallest one, Madge Trammel, runs over to the stairwell and I hear her feet against the rotting wooden steps leading to this attic. Senoia Clayton and Jen Bibbs keep watching Joaquin's arms and legs sprawling beneath me.

"I'm giving you more than you deserve," I say. "These little girls have fathers who would tie you up and stab every inch of your skin with thumb tacks and take turns shooting you in the legs."

"Such a warped mind you have, Nero," Joaquin says. "I couldn't even come up with that."

Leaning down to turn him over, I backhand this asshole in the face. I could give each of these girls a hammer and let them take turns breaking him apart. That wouldn't teach them anything. It would feel so good, though.

"They're coming," Madge says.

"Take these two downstairs with you," I say.

"No," Madge holds up her hand. "We want to stay."

The other girls nod. Joaquin pulls up his arms and slowly spreads his hands apart like a ringmaster. Considering I haven't asked what he did to them, I assumed he didn't feed them, beat them, raped them, and other horrible things I don't want to imagine. It's possible he didn't sodomize them and their bruises are from struggling with him. When a man kidnaps three girls, it's best to assume the worst.

"See?" Joaquin says. "Just like you, Nero. They have a wicked sense of justice."

"I have to protect you from them," I say. "From their families. You're welcome. Now shut up."

Once the sirens start, the girls go downstairs, and I grab Joaquin by his collar and drag him with me. I'm not sure who'll show up since Detective Easton quit the police force because of this case. I stopped cooperating with APD after that.

Helping people like Madge, Senoia, and Jen means facing the worst part about being alive. I can't ignore men like Joaquin like people with families who put on Haptic Masks to leave reality. Since Lily McCord, he's the sickest person I encountered and I fear he's a prelude to others.

A woman with tight cornrows and distinct cheek bones flashes her badge at me as officers round up the girls into a van and another puts handcuffs on Joaquin. Her name is Detective Simone Caplan, though she doesn't look near Easton's age.

"You know the last one almost got off because of how you handled it?" She asks.

"What?"

"Lily McCord almost walked because of you," Simone points. "What do you think is going to happen to him looking like he does?"

"I'm not a cop," I say. "Just a citizen who happened upon the scene."

"And you didn't testify in the last trial, and you won't be called to testify in this one either."

This doesn't sound like a grateful gesture. I saved the girls and caught the kidnapper. That will be the least of his charges. No judge is going to let him walk just because I beat the shit out of him.

"Lily McCord only got eight years, Nero. She fed men to her dogs. What do you think this guy will get? Three years? One for every girl?"

"If not for me, they might be dead."

"And he should be dead too."

I could kill him now. The police couldn't stop me. Picking Caplan up by her ankles and hoisting her around like a pinwheel sounds more appealing.

"If he isn't in prison for life," I say, "I'll cut his legs off, okay?"

Surprisingly, Caplan doesn't require the last word before she exits the scene. Joaquin looks at me with that same grin as the officer starts the engine and coasts around the other cars parked around the house. There's no way a judge will acquit him. Even if he only gets three years, I might keep my promise and take off his legs.

The justice system has a way of erasing the victims' story, though. Trials and media coverage are about the perpetrator. Those girls get to go home in one piece, but what about how they feel? What kind of women will they grow into instead of the women they were meant to be? Joaquin took that away.

There are other cities and other Joaquins, I fear. When I focus too long on the scum, I forget about the good in life.

After I shower at home, I go out to a diner not far from Rossa's old neighborhood. The name *Waffle House* used to scar the front, but the owner painted over it and now it's just a box with windows and old booths. When I walk over to the corner of the room, people that once avoided making eye contact with the big man now smile and wave at me. I haven't been here in a while, so it's not like I'm a regular.

"Mr. Nero," The waitress puts a glass water jar down, "What can I get you?"

"Three strips of bacon," I say, "And four scrambled eggs with cheese."

"You want one or two slices of cheese?"

"Just the one is fine."

"It's no extra charge."

"One is fine."

Having never met this woman before, I glance at her name tag before she hollers my order at the cook: Diana. She has that waitress vibe we all know. Sharp voice, eyes that saw too many drunken brawls, and ears that wish you'd shut the fuck up.

The cook brings my two plates and Diana tries to walk around him to see if I need a refill, but he's keen on seeing me. Guy has a smile that reminds me too much of Joaquin when I beat his face in today.

"It's on the house today, Mr. Nero," He says. "I saw the news report about those girls on my break. They give you more coverage than the guy who kidnapped them."

"Thank you," I nod. "I appreciate that."

"You just drinking water today?" He asks.

"It's what Diana gave me," I shrug. "I'm fine."

There should be a diner in town where the waitress and cook don't know my name and the other patrons aren't gawking at me. By the time I'm finished, my jar never went empty and that cook winked at me five times. I leave a ten dollar gold credit on the table and leave.

After what I did today, I will never have a real life. People expect me to fix their problems now. The overt kindness and free food singles me out of the crowd, and that's not why I do this. Before I came back to Atlanta, my life had stabilization for a moment. Living in Portland with Prudence felt good. But the itch for something more wouldn't stop.

Rather than stalk the Atlanta streets, I take 100mg of CBD and lie down in bed. There's dust on my pillow. I don't want to think. If possible, I want to sleep for a week and avoid the world for a month. Then I'll turn on the news to see if anything changed.

I don't bother getting dressed before putting the kettle on and sitting on my kitchen counter in my underwear. When my bed grows cold and my barbells still glisten from my sweat, I know there's widening hole I'm dancing around. Age creeps toward me like my twenties snuck out the window with my memory of the last cheeseburger I ate.

Taking my tea to the couch, someone knocks on the front door just as I set my cup on the side table. I have a front gate, but I forgot to lock it last night. There is a No Trespassing sign, though. People tend to grow impatient and knock more than once because I have to walk down a long hallway and past several rooms. Despite that my living room and kitchen are connected, there's a home gym, library I never use, dining room, and guest living room before entering the foyer.

Detective Caplan tilts her head and squints her eyes at me. If she's going to be this audacious as a police officer, I might rethink my stance on killing people. Rather than say anything, I stare back at her.

"Have you watched the news this morning?" She asks. "Your boy Joaquin isn't going to trial."

"Okay, let me get my chainsaw, I guess."

"No," Caplan gestures. "Two guys killed him in his holding cell last night. The on duty cop was in the bathroom."

"Are you sure he didn't cheer them on?" I ask.

I'm not against other people killing. Joaquin deserved to die. I refuse to become a murderer, though. That's not something people undo.

"You came here to tell me that?" I ask.
"And Lily McCord is being transported to a new low security facility in Birmingham. A woman murdered enough men to fill a room and she gets a vacation from Hell."
"I have a cup of tea getting cold."
"Sounds nice," Caplan says. "I haven't slept yet. Station called me in as soon as they found Joaquin incapacitated."
"I have more than one tea bag," I open the door wider.
Caplan steps into the foyer, so I lock us inside and guide her through my home. I haven't had anyone in here since I finished moving in almost three years ago, so my entertainment skills lack spark.
She accepts the hot mug and holds the saucer in her lap, but I try sipping down as much of mine as I can before it gets lukewarm. Despite her straight posture and muscular physique, Caplan doesn't cross her legs or lean back into her seat. It's like I'm drinking with a queen.
"Do you ever relax?" I ask.
"Do you own a robe?" She asks.
"I wasn't expecting a guest," I say. "And I only have this body for so long. Today is the first time I've woken up close to dawn or working out in months if not years."
"I don't know anyone who has a home gym," Caplan sets down her tea. "I work out at the station almost every morning."
"Seems unnecessary now. I don't even need to be strong to do what I do. I'm invincible, after all."
"You're so tall I doubt you'll ever be fat."
"That would require eating carbohydrates," I say.
"I was about to say," Caplan coughs. "This tea is a little bitter."
What am I supposed to talk to her about? She accepted my invitation to come inside. What does that mean? Caplan probably thinks it's strange I don't even own a bag of sugar yet have several cars. Then again, she is probably curious about me. Perhaps the APD changed their mind about allowing a vigilante do their job?
"You're not going to call me like Detective Easton, are you?" I ask.
"No," Caplan says. "You help, but you also harm. If we had a scale and tried to determine if you helped or harmed us more, then you might see why."
"I can't stop," I say. "You might say I was bred for this. Born into it."
"What are you going to do when I try to arrest you for interfering?"
"You'd arrest me?"
"If you're illegally trying to aid a police investigation, yeah."
"So, if you try to arrest me, I'll leave. Come home. Go to bed."
"What if we show up here?"
That's what this interaction is about. She came here to warn me. Why would someone rather children be raped and murdered by a psychopath than accept my help? If Caplan ever tries to arrest me, then I have to make an example of her. I hate to do that to a woman.

Taking her mug, I stand up and set the tea next to my phone before slipping my fingers under Caplan's chin. All of her muscles harden. On her left is a stun gun in a holster. If she tries to taze me, then I'm going to be a lot less gentle about this.

"Don't ever come here again," I say. "To answer your question, I will absolutely pin you down and make you watch as I kill every officer you let step onto my property. Then I will string you upside down like a deer and cut your throat so you bleed out onto my driveway. Do you want to test me?"

Raising both her hands, Caplan pulls away from me and walks out of the living room. I don't care for how she slams my door, but I'm not going to do anything about it. Instead, I wait for her to drive away and go lock my gate. Still, I admire that she doesn't need the last word. I wish she'd realize I want to help the police and befriend me. We could have tea more often.

2133

Parking the four-wheel ATV at an angle, I activate the thermal detection in my scope and peer down at the farm house. Three people are inside, though one of them isn't moving, and they're all alive. If I ride the ATV down there, they'll hear me and I might as well scream that I'm here. Might be fun to roll down there like a little kid on a hill.

I see the back of Lily McCord's head as I'm kneeling and crawling through overgrown weeds. Last time, I let her poison a man right in front of me. Strange that the first thing she wants to do when she breaks out is to kidnap two people and hold them in a decaying cottage. Seems like she's expecting me and I'm walking into a trap.

There's only one door inside, so Lily expects me to come in that way. I'd climb on the roof and jump through a window, but it's tin and she'll hear every step I make. If I set the house on fire, she'll leave the hostages inside and I'll have to rely on fate to save them.

Creeping up to the window, I peek in with one eye and see a man handcuffed and unconscious on the floor. Detective Caplan is tied to a chair. What the hell is she doing in Birmingham? That pit in the dirt floor doesn't look inviting either. From a distance, the house looked like a quaint cottage, but this is a one room shack.

Rather than dramatically smashing through the window, I walk over to the front door and the direction of the hinges tells me it opens toward the outside. There's an APD police cruiser parked nearby. Caplan came to Birmingham specifically for Lily, and somehow Lily managed to subdue a trained police officer and a random man. After surviving on prison food for almost two years, I doubt Lily has the strength to pull that off.

Crawling around to the passenger side of the car, I open the door and slide in to push the brake down and put the car in neutral. Since this is the only vehicle Lily can use to escape, I pull out my knife and sever the brake cable before getting behind the car and pushing it toward the front door.

The only way out is through the windows behind the house and on the right side. Who the hell builds a house in the middle of nowhere with only two windows and one door? Maybe someone who bred and milked cows for a living wasn't sharp.

Knocking on the front door, I duck and run over to the nearest window. As Lily tries pushing the door open, I break the glass with my right fist, unlock the latch, and let myself inside. Caplan's acting skills confirm my theory that she's not actually tied to that chair and the gun on her belt is probably loaded with the safety off.

"Don't even start, Lily," I say.

"She poisoned that man," Caplan gestures with her head. "He needs to purge now!"

"Umm," Lily says. "I'm over here?"

Pulling Caplan from her seat, I toss her firearm into the pit that she and Lily probably dug together before tossing her on top of the man, who jolts awake. Lily starts climbing out the window, so I pull her back inside and stomp on her spine to keep her still. Her throat lets out a breathy, shrill tone.

"Detective Caplan," I say, "Kudos for the scheme."

"Vince, help get him in the pit," Caplan says.

Caplan and her man friend get up, and they probably assume that both of them can toss me into the ground. Rather than wait around to fight them, I pull Lily over my shoulder and back out of the window. She yelps when I land on her legs, but we're both alive.

"Do you know where the keys to the car are?" I ask.

"The cop has them," Lily says.

"You think this is over now, huh?" Caplan says through the window.

Vince jumps into the pit to toss Caplan her pistol. Predictably, Caplan shoots him and leaves him to rot. I motion for Lily to get into the car, and hopefully she's smart enough to get in the backseat to take cover.

"You can shoot me," I say, "But what good will it do?"

"Why don't you come back inside and we'll see?"

"Caplan, you're in a fire hazard built in the 1970's."

Pulling out my electronic lighter, I put a small flame under the windowsill, which ignites with a slow start that blazes as the fire meets the framing and travels upward. Caplan backs away and goes to the other window, so snatch her gun and yank her by the arm to the ground. After removing the clip and bullet in the chamber, I toss the 9mm back into the house.

We both hurry over to the front of the house when we hear the patrol car's engine, though I hold Caplan's arm so she doesn't run away. She doesn't know I cut the brake cable, but Lily is about to find out.

"You have two choices," I say. "Either you climb up this mountain and ride back to town with me or I can leave you here to fend for yourself."

"I might just fend for myself then," Caplan says.

"Hold on," I say.

Tugging Caplan behind me, we move around the steadily burning house to see Lily idling down the dirt driveway. When she goes to turn, the car flips over and tumbles several times until it hits a tree. I'd feel bad about that if she wasn't a murderer the same way I'd regret letting Caplan get eaten by a bear after she shot that guy a few moments ago.

"So," I say, "You want to start the hike with me?"

"How far away is Piedmont?" She asks.

"Ten miles if you cut through the hiking trail on the other side of the mountain. From here, I'd say eleven miles, so it'll be a two to three hour walk for you."

I start moving back to my ATV and Caplan decides to join me. She's not nearly as pleased about this as me. I don't bother hiding my smile.

"What's the plan when we get into Piedmont?" Caplan asks.

"I'll turn you in to the state patrolmen waiting at the station," I say. "I told them I'd be back in about an hour."

"You were that confident you'd find me?"

"I was looking for Lily. I didn't know you were there."

"It wasn't just supposed to be me."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"Fuck off."

When we sit on the ATV, I offer Caplan my helmet, but she ignores me. I don't want to her fall off and die because of me, so I pull the handcuffs I put in the storage compartment out and force her wrists around my stomach.

"You gonna to jerk off thinking about this later?" Caplan asks.

"I never acquired a taste for masturbation," I say. "Do you think I'd have any issue getting laid if I wanted?"

"How could anyone fuck a pencil dicked asshole like you?" She asks.

Once the engine cuts on, the conversation pauses. Caplan grew so annoyed by me that she plotted to either keep me in a pit or bury me alive. While I know I'm not super charismatic, why does she detest me? Other than Rossa, I think Jamron was the only person to like me. I'm not keen on meeting new people and finding a girlfriend, so I guess this is my life.

The two Alabama state patrolmen exchange furrowed eyebrows when I show up with an uniformed woman rather than a gray haired white lady. I assume Lily is either dead or gravely injured, but I'll let them find that out.

"Officers," I say, "This is Atlanta's finest: Detective Simone Caplan. I found her in a farmhouse with Lily McCord and an unnamed man. Caplan shot this man, Lily stole the patrol car that Caplan unlawfully took across state lines, and now the house is on fire. You'll find Lily's body in the turned over car and I'm sure Caplan will give you some version of the truth when you question her."

"Thank you Mr. Nero," One of them shakes my hand. "We'll take her into custody now."

Winking at Caplan, I write down the coordinates for the farmhouse and moan a little when she's shut into the patrolman's car. I probably just burned every bridge I had with the Atlanta police department, but I have a few more bulls to ride before I bow out of the rodeo.

"Where you headed now?" The patrolman asks.

"Back to Atlanta," I say. "Gotta return this four wheeler I rented, though."

"If they want to run you out of there, you can always come here. We'd love to have you."

A month later, I'm eating store bought red velvet cake in my underwear while watching the live sentencing date. Unlike the corruption in old America when cops murdered people in the street, New America wants to make an example of Caplan for breaking the law. I can't take too much pleasure in seeing a woman with a badge getting taken away in shackles sporting an orange jumpsuit, though.

When I lived with Jamron, he didn't talk much about himself until the end of the day when we'd sit on his dock and wait around for a fish to bite. Not only did Jamron serve as a detective for APD, he survived the dark period before New America.

"The South wasn't the place you wanted to be back then," Jamron said. "If you had some stale saltine crackers, someone would shoot you for them. Now, if I was white, maybe my parents wouldn't have been murdered. I got by because I knew how to shoot and how to run."

"Why didn't you go north?" I asked.

"Survival sometimes doesn't allow for travel," Jamron said. "I couldn't teleport. Couldn't drive a car. If someone saw me on a horse, they'd shoot me for the meat."

Jamron kept looking at the lake and bit his lip. He lost his parents, became a successful detective, and someone in the Trinity murdered his wife and son. I may be able to catch a few bad guys, but I'll never be the detective Jamron was.

Caplan had an opportunity to truly ascend and perform her duty as a role model in Atlanta. Maybe she'll meet the same fate as Joaquin and inmate will tear her apart like a chicken thrown into a dog cage. Had she not murdered a man, I'd say she deserved a second chance.

2134

The corrections officer buzzes me into the visitation room. Behind a glass wall wearing a beige top sits Simone Caplan with her hair shaved off. I haven't seen her since the trial ended. We have the room to ourselves because the guards know me by reputation, and they're not concerned about protecting her.

"Why are you here?" Caplan asks.

"You're getting your way," I say. "The new police chief banned any officers from cooperating with me."

"What made him come to his senses?"

Since I turned in one of their own, APD distanced themselves from me yet I still kept tabs on potential crimes in town. For years, Atlanta repurposed the old Mercedes Benz stadium as a homeless shelter and kitchen. By 2130, the place looked like a rusted tool box, so construction on a new shelter started. In 2133, the city closed the stadium for good but had no immediate plans to demolish it since Washington DC states it's a historical landmark.

Because New America provides housing and food for the poor while preventing evictions for the unemployed, there's little reason to steal. People aren't starving or having to pay large hospital bills. Lately, car theft is the fashionable crime. The only issue is that the police can't find cars that aren't on the street. Therefore, someone is keeping them somewhere.

"You ever hear of a Kirkrich Belway?" I ask.

"The guy who worked for Sean Teleportation?"

"I didn't know that."

"When a certain someone decided to shut down those servers four years ago, he was the one who got fired."

Shutting down the teleportation servers helped me find Lily McCord and stop her from murdering more people. I almost saved lives. Not unlike when Lily poisoned that man in front of me, I watched Caplan shoot someone and let Lily drive herself into a ditch. Creating problems out of the ones I solve is like losing puzzle pieces when I'm trying to put them together.

"I helped APD track down twenty stolen cars Belway and others stowed away in the Benz stadium," I say.

"Good for you," Caplan says. "Come here to brag?"

The cars weren't actually cars anymore when I led the police raid. The arena looked more like a junk yard. Belway wanted to clear the few vehicles left in Atlanta as an environmental protest move. Not unlike Mansor Sean, Belway and three others didn't mind spraying gunpowder everywhere and two police officers got shot upon entry.

One of Belway's crew got a bullet in the chest. I disarmed the other two. What really pissed off APD was that Belway escaped and now we can't find him. Thus, my career as a lawful vigilante ended.

"I'm here because you wouldn't be here if not for me," I say. "I'm here for a second chance."

"Are you here to apologize?" Caplan asks. "An apology ain't gonna get me out of here."

"But I can."

Lifting the metal chair, Caplan rolls onto the floor as I break the glass separating us. Of course, the window remains in place and I only shattered the glass inside the frame, and the guards come in on each side. Two men grab Caplan to remove her from the room, and two more aim their stun guns at me.

"Alright Nero," A guard says. "I don't know what the hell you were trying to accomplish, but we're going to escort you off the premises. Probably send you a bill for that glass too."

I point to my pocket with my other hand in the air so I can pull out a money clip. Both guards accept a fifty dollar gold credit and put their weapons away. They probably think Caplan said something to piss me off and I wanted to attack her.

My plan was more about making myself feel better about turning Caplan in than giving her a second chance. Realistically, she'd eventually be arrested and tried for a longer sentence, and I'd have to flee the city. This was like my plan to blow up the post office.

If Belway is smart, he teleported to Canada already, but he wants to be a hero recognized for helping the environment. Now my idea to build a bomb doesn't sound terrible. Just because the cops showed up to the stadium doesn't mean he won't come back.

Luckily, I own several cars, and a red flashy one like my GM Thoroughbred might catch Belway's eye. Sometimes the cheese is enough to snap the mouse's neck. My Ruger Precision Rifle should be enough to startle the bastard too.

Like all great ideas, I need contingency and a backup. A few empty glass bottles, a Kevlar vest, wooden sled, and sturdy rope fit in the backseat. The only thing other than the gun I'll use is the deer jerky in the glove compartment. I might be hanging out here for a while.

Belway probably weighs a hundred-and-twenty-five pounds and his right arm pulls back whenever he fires a gun. Since he's a wanted man nationwide, homeless shelters won't feed him, so he either has to purchase food while hoping no one recognizes him or he steals it. A smaller target like Belway means a higher risk of hitting a vital organ.

I park the Thoroughbred outside the stadium before the sunsets. Setting the glass bottles under the car, I lock every door except the driver's seat and find a vantage point behind one of the large pillars. Unlike a normal clip with rifle ammunition, the miniature sponge grenades awkwardly fit into the Ruger. I had these made in Portland by an antique arms repairman, Mitchell Clever, so I could fire a gun at people without killing them. Of course, there's always a risk I could hurt or mortally wound someone, but much less than an actual bullet.

Once the sun sets, I pull my black mask on and use my thermal binoculars to check for anyone in the perimeter. Since I don't have the technology to crank my car with a remote and turn donuts in the parking lot, my scare tactic remains the element of surprise. If Belway doesn't show up tonight, I'll have to set this all up again tomorrow.

There's a faint red glow coming toward the parking lot. Considering the small size, I'd say this is Belway. Readying the Ruger, I wait for the little man to approach the Thoroughbred and lower my aim to the glass bottles underneath. As he reaches for the door handle, I let off a round and pop one of the bottles, which makes the would-be thief jump. Aiming for his lower back, I fire and can't help a guffaw when Belway lands on his ass.

Running over to the scrawny shit trying to crawl under the car while dodging glass shards, I grab his right ankle and drag him across the pavement. Once I have Belway's neck, I pop the trunk and toss him inside. There's no need for introductions at this point.

At some point, Atlanta tried improving public transportation via Marta. Underground tunnels were dug in 2022, but the city's public transit department had to be bailed out by Harley Freudlind and Fonda Communications. A tunnel near I-85 remains empty; a place for hobos and cheap blowjobs.

Outside the entrance, I ready the sled by tying one end to my car and unravel the Kevlar vest. Belway tries to hit and bite me when I open the trunk, but a punch to his gut calms him down. He's not struggling when I get the vest on him.

"You going to try hunting me or something?" Belway asks. "What's the vest for?"

"So most of your body is safe," I say.

"Do you have to make it so tight around my ankles?"

"I want to make sure you don't fall off."

"Couldn't you just shoot me in the head?"

"I don't kill people," I say.

"Oh," Belway says.

I take off the mask so he can see me.

"Nero," He tries getting out of the rope.

"You killed two police officers not long ago," I say. "Remember that?"

"You guys showed up with guns," He says. "We were defending ourselves."

"Then let's say this is in self-defense too."

Revving the engine makes Belway scream, though I can't make out what he's saying in that pleading tone. I start slow in the tunnel before hitting a steep hill and keep my foot off the brake. Only my bright headlights and brakes light the dark concrete around us. His voice sounds miles away as the Thoroughbred nears the walls and Belway slams into the concrete. Hopefully, he doesn't flip.

Soon the engine overpowers Belway's voice when I make the top speed. After a few minutes the light near the end tells me to slow down. How did I make it through that ten mile tunnel in a few minutes?

The opening leads to an old railway alongside I-85, which is empty. Since very few people own cars, many areas don't have speed limits. I abuse this opportunity and floor the gas. In the rearview, Belway remains intact, though I bet his vocal cords hurt.

In the Army, I learned how to drive restored Jeeps up steep hillsides and around mountain ranges without turning over into ditches. Returning to Atlanta only for Kyair, the man I almost consider my Dad, to make me follow the same strict daily routine I kept since my teenage years. Even now, I feel off when I don't exercise at least an hour. In his older years, Kyair wasn't much bigger than Belway. Unlike me, he sat around most of the time.

Belway served just like anyone else in New America. Having the military background helped most of us learn structure and live healthier. A guy like Belway forgot his country. Neglected himself in favor of a lost cause.

Parking under a bridge, I find Belway panting. Untying the rope from the car, I hoist him over my shoulder before dropping him on the hood. Turning him into the police won't help my standing with APD. After my stunt at the prison, I doubt they even want me near the station.

"Was it fun?" I ask.

"Fucking sicko," He says.

"Sick?" I point at myself. "You look at me and think I'm crazier than you? A murderer?"

I clench my fingers around his pale unshaven face while gritting my teeth. My other hand clenches and bores into his stomach.

"I'm definitely sick," I say. "Sick of men and women like you who can't stay at home, work a job, or mind their own business. You stole cars from regular people who worked for their possessions. You're a symbol of failure, Kirkrich. Do you hear anyone calling you a hero? Listen. Hear anything? I bet you've heard it all of your life. Indifference to your perverted mind. Silence from the majority."

He groans when I slam him down on the road. His hair reminds me of a wet dog coming in from the rain. Blood falls from his mouth and scratches on each cheek.

"If you're really Nero," Belway says, "You're going to turn me into the police... alive."

"You're still alive, aren't you?"

Belway shuts his eyes and lies flat. Leaving him alive and out of jail in this condition sends a message that the arrests of Lily McCord, Joaquin Lindsay, and Simone Caplan apparently failed at: There's now a worse fate than free housing and meals at the big house. Lily and Joaquin died due to their own decisions. Simone remains breathing because she was an officer. Belway can tell his friends about how Nero left him for dead on the old interstate, though. My actions at the prison show I'm not much of a planner, but I can torture and hurt everyone unlike anyone else in town.

2135

The barbell clanks into place as the house alarm blares. From the screen mounted in the hallway, I see someone at the front gate trying to break the locks. Grabbing my towel to collect my sweat, I head outside to greet yet another unexpected guest. That's my third fan to stop by this week.

He's stocky but built. With a shaved head that shiny, he could pass as my personal trainer. Unfortunately for him, those pliers won't cut through my lock. He finally stops to breathe when he sees me standing there to meet him.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Why the fuck do you care?" He asks.

"Because if you're here at one in the afternoon, I assume you know mine. You could just ring the bell."

"Denley," He says.

I open the gate and step onto the street with Denley. When I purchased the property, I bought any nearby lots to make sure I never had neighbors. Anyone passing through has no reason to be here unless they want to see me.

"What friend of yours did I hurt, Denley?" I ask.

"You don't recognize me yet?" He asks.

"Sorry," I shrug.

"I was one of the guards you almost ran over in thirty-one," He says. "I got fired because of you."

"You just now decided to enact your revenge plot?"

Admittedly, I don't recognize him. My memory of that day was crashing my car into the server room and handing out fifty dollar credits to those guys. Obviously, I fought one or two of them. What was that one guy's name? Gizzard?

"My last job was unloading trucks at Piggly Wiggly," Denley says. "They let me go because I scared customers."

"So stop working out and eat some ice cream," I say. "Not my problem, Denley."

When someone punches me in the chin, my teeth scrape together and my joints bend out of place. Just because I can't die doesn't mean I don't feel pain. I'm not embarrassed that I fell down and now have this human lug nut kicking me in the balls. It's not like I can have children anyway.

If I killed everyone who physically hurt me, I wouldn't be Nero. However, I like immediate revenge. Since late 2134, I find immediate retribution works best. The media reported where I live, so I have visitors that want to challenge me to fights, toss bottles at my head because I got their boyfriends arrested, fire guns at me for interrupting the bank robbery they planned for weeks, and occasionally women who want to reward me by flashing their boobs and giving me the middle finger. I'm a popular guy.

Denley teleported to the nearest terminal two miles away and walked here. That's how everyone shows up. He doesn't have a car with tires I can slash or an engine block I can drop on his feet. That also means he doesn't have a quick getaway.

Once he's finished kicking and screaming, I pull his left leg out from under him and pin Denley to the gravel. Making an example of Belway worked for about a month. Then people wanted to challenge me. I guess my examples need oomph and hutzpah.

"Let me make you a cup of tea, Denley," I say.

Now, I don't want to get my kitchen dirty, so I lay a tarp from under the sink down on my wood floor as Denley tries to get his handcuffed hands to push off the 300 pound weight I put on his chest. He's strong enough to breathe, but his wrists can't lift his body up enough to slide it off.

I took off his shirt before I put the kettle on because I don't want to ruin what could be his only suitable top. Admittedly, he has nice tone. Why doesn't he work in a gym? I float the idea out there before the water starts boiling, though he's not receptive.

"How do you take your tea?" I ask.

Unlatching the spout, the water falls in a thin stream onto Denley's bare chest. I don't want the scar to be too wide. His toes curl and spread repeatedly, and I worry he'll break a tooth with all that grinding in his mouth. When some dribbles down to his neck, I take off my towel and wrap it around his throat for protection.

Lifting the weight from his stomach allows Denley to breathe as he rasps and pleads with me to stop. I suppose torturing a man makes me a monster. Is there a moral distinction between murder and going beyond self-defense?

"I need to get a dog," I say. "Maybe a few. What do you think? Dobermans, maybe?"

"Please take these cuffs off me," Denley says.

"What would frighten you more? A pack of Dobermans or Pitbulls?"

"I'm sorry. Let me go home."

"Why don't I take you?"

Strapping a man to the top of a car takes a few strands of rope and creative tying patterns. To keep Denley in one spot, I have to wrap the cord around his handcuffs and between the legs. I expect to attract the cops at some point since Denley lives south of downtown.

Instead of going straight to his address, I take a detour through Chappell RD around Bankhead. There's a collection of apartments once considered upscale now barely able to stand thanks to the cheap construction contractors resorted to in order to meet growing gentrification of the city. The old small houses held up in comparison. If New America had money, someone would want all of these relics demolished for new buildings and parks. Everyone between I-20 and I-75 would be better off living in old train cars.

Once I'm on Schoen Street, I pull over to untie Denley and unlock his cuffs. He runs away toward his house without saying goodbye. As I'm getting back into my Thoroughbred, an APD officer parks behind me, so I roll down my window and keep my engine going for the AC. Too hot to indulge a cop's paranoia.

This particular cop has long hair and a little more weight below the waist than I expected. I'm glad I stopped here for her to show up. Maybe she'd like to help me pick out some dogs?

"Can I see your identification sir?" She asks.

"That your last name?" I point at her badge.

"Caitbeth Pierson," She nods. "Nero Sullivan?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Officer," Pierson says. "Yes officer."

"Am I free to go?"

"No. I just watched you untie a man from the top of your car. We had several calls about someone driving a red GM Thoroughbred with a man screaming on top."

"Sounds like me," I say.

"Any particular reason you did that?"

I reach for the gear shift and Officer Pierson tries to grab my wrist, so she's not a well trained policeman considering putting your head into someone's car could end in losing a limb or your noggin. Rather than drive with her legs hanging out of my window, I push her out and start idling away. Less than a moment later, her siren is on and I bet she's calling for backup. Let's have a party at my place.

Pierson is my only tail when I make it back to the house. I let her park inside the gate, which might result in another Denley incident. Then again, my approach to Caplan was less aggressive.

"If it had been anyone else," Pierson slams her door, "You'd be railroaded off the highway by four squad cars."

"Backup didn't show up, huh?" I ask.

"As soon as I said your name, my commanding officer told me to back off."

"Well, I'd hate for you to think I'm above the law."

Crossing her arms and leaning against the APD car, Pierson can't have the law her way. I'm sure plenty of men discourage her every day, and I'm a surface she'll never penetrate. However, she followed me here because she probably believes someone who breaks the law, no matter who or why, should go to jail. Caplan grew so frustrated with me she helped a murderer escape prison to lure me into a trap.

"You want to know what happened?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter," She says. "It's not like I can arrest you."

"Well, maybe we can help each other?"

"How's that work?" She asks.

"APD has avoided any relationship with me since I turned in Simone Caplan to Alabama State Patrol," I say. "I want to work with the law. What I did today wasn't a common thing for me."

"Apply for a job, Sherlock," Pierson shrugs. "I'm nobody in the department."

"Let's change that."

"No thanks," She opens her door, "Could you open the gate?"

"Where's your loyalty here?" I ask. "To a department that won't back you or to yourself?"

Pierson looks back at the closed gate and clenches her hands on the steering wheel. I reach in my pocket to open the gate with my remote and turn away from her. If she's intrigued, she'll let me know.

"Do you have a phone number or something?" Pierson asks.

"Here," I say, "I have a card."

"Wow," She says, "At least it's not a Batman Visa card."

"I left it in the cave under the house."

2136

Since New America doesn't have radio signals, I thought Walkie Talkies were novelty toys from old movies. No one has a portable phone. Police have the closest thing to cellular technology with their Bluetooth based communicators. I don't know how it works. Pierson just handed me a noisy box and told me to stand on top of a building.

Back in the days of Jenzy Loeb, the New American gangster wasn't an arms dealer so much as a stockpiler. The only mass production of ammunition is for the police force and Army, so people have to pay premium prices for small batches. People who hunt for meat are better off with crossbows.

Thus, we have a high cost black market. Part of that black market is pulling into a dirt lot surrounded by disused train cars and broken down locomotives. That Escalade looks similar to what Lily McCord used to wear, but the driver is bald and wearing a scarf around their face.

"The black cow has been poured," I say.

"Can those sponge bullets pop a tire?" Pierson buzzes back.

"No."

"Then use a real bullet if they try to get away."

A Chevy Tahoe with several stainless steel replacement parts steers around a group of train cars to meet the dealer. Rather than get out like the mystery Escalade driver, one of the passenger windows rolls down for a man to start shouting. I'm too far away to make out what they say to each other, but Escalade reaches into their window for an AK-47 that apparently triggers the others hardcore because four men come out of that Tahoe.

I don't like the odds of them mowing down the dealer, so I grab my Ruger rifle and take aim at the nearest bearded man's kneecap. My shot causes the three of them to start shooting in my direction while the dealer hops into the Escalade, throws it in reverse, and hits the gas hard.

"The dealer is coming your way," I say.

"Got ya," Pierson says.

Rather than trade fire with the three men still standing, I slide off this roof and haul ass in their direction. As they keep shooting at me, I take off my ski mask and stand in front of them before hearing a crash behind me. Pierson drove right into the Escalade, so now I have to worry about her getting shot. She's never needed me to intervene before, but I still worry.

The three gunmen and their friend I shot with a sponge grenade notice that I'm still alive despite their attempts to shoot me. They finally realize who I am and lower their guns.

"Guys," I say, "I'm obviously not a cop, but you're under arrest."

"Fuck this," One says. "Let's go."

Pierson and the dealer exchange bullets several yards away while I wait for the four shitheads to load back into their SUV. Once they're all inside, I pull the Tahoe up from the side and push them over. Had I been a normie outside of the Trinity, I'd have broken my back. While they're all screaming and scrambling, I run over to the Escalade situation.

"You alive?" I ask.

"They've got a lot of ammo," Pierson responds.

Once the dealer spots me, they dart from the Escalade to the nearest train car. Waiting for Pierson to back me up, I see the inside is totally dark. Now, there's a possibility this person has no idea who I am and will shoot at me, which reveals their location. Another possibility is they know exactly who I am and have a can of mace. My solution is to take my Ruger and fire a few rounds inside, which reveals a woman is our dealer as she screams as anyone would while someone fires multiple rounds at her in a closed environment.

"Put your weapons down and come out with your hands raised," I say.

"I have some tear gas in my glove box," Pierson whispers.

"Who carries that shit around in their glove box?" I ask.

"Come on in, Nero," The dealer says. "I know you're not going to kill me."

Grabbing Pierson's gun, which has live rounds, I aim into the darkness and shoot once. From the small light, I see a figure on the left corner inside the train car. Aiming above her head, I fire again.

"Sure about that?" I ask.

Sirens echo throughout the train graveyard. Pierson motions for her backup to come over. Since I have no authority, I hand her back the gun and let the cops deal with this. The dudes in the Tahoe kicked their guns out and crawled out of the windows as police handcuff them. That ended a lot more peacefully than I expected.

"Holy Christ," Pierson says.

I turn around to see Simone Caplan with an officer on each arm. When did she get out of prison? I suppose she's going right back.

"Hey hey, Nero!" She calls. "Bye bye, APD!"

The Escalade explodes like a grenade turning every piece of fiberglass, metal, and windshield into shrapnel. Three officers are down on the left while Pierson's car follows the pattern and makes a smaller explosion. A nearby APD GM Torino catches fire.

While Pierson is far enough away not to be hit, Caplan is crawling on the ground to get away from the growing flames. We both chase and pin her down. When I turn her onto her back, half of her face is missing, so I take off my shirt and hold it to stop the bleeding.

"Why the hell are you helping her?" Pierson asks.

"Go check on the others," I say.

Grasping Caplan's hand, I force her to hold the shirt to her face before I hoist her up and run past the wreckage. I left my rifle behind, but Pierson will probably find it. Once again, I am partially to blame for Caplan's actions. I haven't stopped thinking about how she could have a second chance, and now she's ruined any potential for redemption.

Setting her in the backseat of my matte black GM, I double check that my headlights are off before starting the engine. All of APD is entering and exiting the road leading to the train yard, so I have to navigate around long lines of rusted metal frames that once held America's goods. When I find a fence leading out of the property, I mash the accelerator and punch through the chain link.

"You're not taking me to the hospital, are you?" Caplan asks.

"Some of those officers you injured might need skin grafts," I say. "Why would I let them waste any on you?"

"I'd probably be dead before they could fix me."

She's still fidgeting in the backseat by the time I make it to I-20 and pass the closed Six Flags. Turning off the exit, there's an old gas station with boarded up windows that keeps the car unseen from anyone who might pass by in the street. It's so dark, I doubt anyone would be out.

I grab Caplan and fling her to the ground. When I pulled off my shirt to help stop the bleeding from her face, I thought about saving her. I was going to take her to the hospital and make sure a doctor tried to help. If she survived, that's another potential dead person on my conscious. She shot a man who helped her without hesitation; built a car bomb as a contingency. Caplan's plan is to take down anyone who's nearby when the shit hits the fan. Saving her life means letting others die.

"You still with me?" I stand over her.

"My head is pounding," She says.

"I don't have anything for you to take," I say. "You'd be dead before your liver could process it anyway."

"You could kill me. Mercy killing."

"How about a joke instead?"

Caplan looks at me with her good eye and spits blood toward me. I sit next to her on the grass and check her for any other wounds. Glass shards are stuck in her left side and her pants are soaked.

"There's a man who once had nothing," I say, "And he takes out a small business loan to build something. Let's say a French fry restaurant. He's got an old machine that cuts them real thin. People have never had fries like his before. So he's able to pay off the loan and open another restaurant. Then another and another. After all that work, he's ready to settle down in a big brick house with white columns, six bedrooms, four bathrooms, and whatever the hell else people like. A man with his money could have any woman he wants, right? He's not a good looking guy, and no girl in school would spit on him if he caught fire. He finds a redhead with long legs and not a freckle or mark on her. You'd think she was a goddess. So when they get married, he knocks her up and they have a baby. Looks just like her, thank God. Of course, like all mothers, she gets a few stretch marks, her bellybutton sags a little, and her lady parts aren't as tight anymore, but he still loves her."

"Is there a punchline to this?" Caplan breathes.

"For the man who has it all, what more could there be?" I ask. "That's the problem. When he gets everything he's ever wanted, there's nothing left for him to work toward. Then he realizes the struggle when he was putting together his business and selling fries was when he felt most complete because he thought one day he'd be complete."

Caplan's tongue moves, but she can't speak. Sounds like either her mouth is dry or there's too much blood coming out. Her eye still focuses on me, though.

"He looks at his yearbook to see all the kids who called him ugly weren't too pretty either. When he sees those people now, they don't care that he's rich. They don't even waste their breath calling his wife a gold digger. The fries keep selling, though. His wife's red hair turns white. His daughter grows up and gets married. Wife dies. Daughter moves away. All he's left with is the money he made."

How does this one end? I press my forefinger onto Caplan's wrist to feel her dull pulse before it stops. My muscles tingle as I stand up from the grass and walk back to my car. She asked if there was a punchline to the joke. I always though the punchline was the joke. A joke when nobody laughs is still a joke, right? All it means is life is funny. Caplan worked her ass off to become a police officer against the odds; her being a black woman in a patriarchy that never died. We shouldn't be enemies, but Evil doesn't care what we look like. We do what Evil bids us to do when Evil so chooses.

2137

I wanted to stop after Caplan passed away, and the APD never charged me with her death or even contacted me when they found her remains. Pierson hasn't called since that night. Atlanta's creeps and criminals kept a low profile when the media reported the botched arms dealing bust.

Just because there's no action doesn't mean I'm not looking. The backroom poker games stopped when bars found out I was infiltrating them. No more grand theft autos or eco-centric cults. The fears that my involvement as a vigilante might lead to bigger crimes remain bogus. People either smile and nod or cower when they see me at night.

Caplan wouldn't be dead if I wasn't trying to help, though. Yeah, the police can't address every crime or investigate every murder thoroughly, but I'm not much of a detective. I'm able to break the law without consequence, so I can tie a man up in barbed wire and hook him up to a car battery for answers.

I can't blame Kyair for raising me anymore. Every time I stuck my finger in the pie, I was bored. Why'd I leave a beautiful woman to live in Portland with another woman? Boredom. Why'd I leave Portland for Atlanta? Boredom. I'm terrible at sitting around like a housecat. God made me to work. How does Birch take comfort in sitting around not doing anything?

Considering how I couldn't save the officers Caplan killed and took some pleasure in her death, I haven't followed the code of conduct Kyair tried instilling into me. More lives saved out rules the number of times a criminal gets away. Its possible Caplan didn't need me as a catalyst for her insanity and I was a bumper in the game of pinball she played.

Lately, I try reading more often because I want to remedy my lack of intelligence, and TV bores me. I could buy a Haptic Mask and forget everything, but that doesn't build my weakest muscle. *Lipstick Vogue* by Chuck Louis makes me wonder if I would've fit in better in old America before the blackout.

My phone rings as I'm reading the part about the men torturing a young boy at a party. People really like to see humanity pushed to extremes, so I'm not sad about the interruption.

"Hello," I set the book down.

"It's Pierson. Can you meet me at the gas station we found Caplan?"

"I'm in the middle of a book," I say. "Couldn't you come here?"

"There's a Jane Doe laying in the grass that'd like a moment of your time."

I park next to two police vehicles and walk around to see Pierson with four officers searching the area. Surrounded in yellow tape is a faceless corpse dressed all in black. Jane Doe's in the same spot I left Caplan. There're no houses nearby or cameras. Nobody saw me leave here that night. Whoever left this body found out about Caplan whenever someone reported it to the police.

"You have a fan," Pierson points at the body.

"I don't know what you mean," I say.

"We know you didn't kill Caplan," Pierson says, "But nobody doubts you ran off with her and abandoned her body."

"I cannot respond to such allegations."

"Anyway, if you have any enemies you'd like to tell us about, we'd appreciate the cooperation, Nero."

"You could've asked me over the phone," I say.

"I needed to get you out of the house," Pierson says. "The murderer either wants to see you or guarantee you're not on your property."

Some poor woman got her face cut off and Pierson wants to play a game. Rather than stick around to smell a decomposing corpse, I turn the AC on in my car and pull out before she follows me. I don't want to hear whatever she has to say. APD didn't want my help again until someone else ended up dead.

When I pull off the exit toward my house, I smell barbecue. When was the last time I ate a slab of ribs? Since I own all of the surrounding lots and there's smoke rising in the sky, I doubt someone's hosting a family cookout. I had my home built with brick and steel beams in the event of water or fire devastation, yet when I drive up the hill toward my front gate, Sullivan Manor resembles the remnants of a cartoon explosion with every brick in a pile and the security fence in rubble.

My book was in there and I didn't even finish it. Judging by the collapsed garage, my other cars are totaled. Maybe Kirkrich Belway lost his mind and plotted revenge against me?

The two dogs splayed open on the driveway prove otherwise. Their remains smell like spoiled ground beef rotting in a hot car. No flies or maggots are around, so they're fresh kills. I told Denley I wanted a Doberman or Pitbull, and they're not a common breed. If he did this, he spent a lot of money finding those dogs to get me back for scarring his chest. I'm more concerned about where I'm going to sleep tonight and replacing my wardrobe and gym equipment. I need clothes and my routine.

I recognize that I hurt Denley. In my attempt to stop a serial killer shipping body parts to Detective Easton, I ruined Denley's career. He wasn't right to show up to my house and kick me around, and I don't feel sorry for pouring boiling water on him, but I get why he wants more revenge. That Jane Doe seems random. The two dogs are unnecessary cruelty. He can't hurt me physically, so he thinks my mind is open for grabs.

The house Denley ran to when I dropped him off has boarded up windows and a bricked up front door. There's no way he was evicted or foreclosed on. A house this old is worth renovating if there're damages. I look at both houses on each side and nobody's home. Walking back to my car, I don't see anyone around. It's only been two years, right? How did an entire street lose every single resident?

I'm ready to break inside through the backdoor when my stomach reminds me I had eggs for breakfast. This time I smell moldy trash and there's a faceless man wearing all black lying in the weeds. Covering my nose and mouth with my left arm, I kneel down to peer under the dead man's shirt. The scars confirm this is Denley. I can't stand the stench or the swarm of flies, so I run back to my car.

In the span of thirty minutes, I see a Jane Doe, two dead dogs with breeds specific to a private conversation, and another victim in their own backyard. Pierson definitely nailed it when she said I have a fan.

My non-reaction to losing my house and four bodies worries me more than a serial killer trying to get my attention. This is what happens when I can't maintain any intimate relationship. I

take pleasure in nothing, so why would I break down when I lose my stuff or see death? I can replace my possessions and have no interest in resurrecting the dead.

Before I can put the gear into drive, a cop car turns toward me and flashes blue lights. An officer with skin whiter than cocaine flags me down, so I roll down the window and motion for him to come over.

"Mr. Nero," He says, "I'm Officer Jackson Spence, and APD has an all points bulletin requesting a deputy locate you. Can you please follow me?"

"Am I under arrest?" I ask.

"Not hardly," He runs back to his car.

Once we're close to Six Flags, my gut hasn't recovered from Denley's remains. Picturing those dogs on my driveway doesn't help. This has to be more than one person. A single entity cannot plan this well. The Jane Doe lured me out of the house, and Pierson speculated this was what the killer wanted. Now she's in trouble. My first reaction to my house and the dogs was to find Denley, who's been rotting longer than the Jane Doe. One shock after another like I entered a chess game blindfolded against a master.

Pierson's on the pavement next to her police cruiser. Why are none of the four officers tending to her? Spence runs past her to look around the gas station.

"Pierson?" I slap her face.

"My..." She holds her hand on a wound.

"Shit."

Picking her up, I rush over to see Spence doubled over. In the distance are four men dead on the ground. I'm not about to wait for him to gain composure and let Pierson die. As soon as she's in the back seat, I don't bother with my seatbelt or the door before stepping on the accelerator.

"Are you still conscious?" I ask.

"Still," She says.

I'm merging into I-20 when I feel a sharp sensation in my side and my hands grip the wheel tightly but the car seems to spin around. With a quick blink into darkness, I hear Jamron tell me to stay down. That night he stunned me, I hadn't felt anything like that before. This time I'm hit twice.

Two people drag me out and into the trunk. Two engines engage. I try to concentrate on the little bit of light coming from the door. It fades, blurs, and disappears. Whoever opens the door looks wavy and there's no light in here. I'm hit for the third time and they let me fall to the floor.

Warmth tingles down my right leg. Leather binds my wrists. Neither of the figures in front of me speak. My eyes won't focus, but I notice the red drizzling down Pierson's side. Why is she not at the hospital?

Easton hasn't gotten any darker since I last saw him. He might really be anemic. While I'm not precise on why these two are here, I'm certain they aren't rescuing me.

"I wish you would've used mace," I say. "Less urine."

"We'll try mace if you want," Easton says. "We'll try acid. We'll try fire. We'll try drowning you. We'll try anything you can think of."

"So, was it corn syrup?" I ask.

"What?"

"The fake blood on Pierson," I say.

Turning to Easton, Pierson kisses his ghost colored cheek and shakes her red curls. Seems a little theatrical. I thought she was boring until now. She probably left work, let her cats nibble at her fingers while she zoned out with a Haptic Mask, and went to bed at nine. Turns out she's smooching Easton's bone.

"Before you outline you whole scheme," I say, "How was Caplan involved?"

"Oh Simone?" Easton says. "I recommended her for my position before I retired. Did you know lead poisoning causes hair loss? I never thought she'd shave it all off."

"Was it worth killing two dogs and six people?" I ask. "All this to trick me or something?"

"I'm going to say you did it," Pierson shrugs. "You had a motive with all of it, and you burned down your house before fleeing town."

"Brilliant," I say. "There is a hitch."

"What?" Easton asks. "You're strapped to a table. What could you do?"

"Not me," I say. "One of me, though."

All of the lights in the warehouse cut out. I wasn't sure if they kept tabs on me during all of this. Tried not to think about it too much because at any point, Birch could show up and kill me if he wanted. Rossa still loves me, or I'm assuming she does. I never loved her like she deserved, but that doesn't mean she'll let me suffer.

Pierson ignites a lighter and looks in the darkness. The flame bursts in her hands and she drops the contraption with a shriek. Easton tries the switch on the nearest wall. The straps around my wrists and ankles disintegrate, and when I pull myself up, the bright fire begins burning across the room.

"You've heard of deus ex machina," I say. "But what about diabolus ex terra?"

I can get away with cheesy lines since I'm the only commentator for the big game. What I'm missing are Easton and Pierson's thoughts. I bet they're regretting all of their decisions and thinking about how they murdered six people essentially to get my goat. I still don't understand their motive.

As I expect Birch to tear Easton and Pierson into tater tots, they stop moving. The lights come back on. My old adversary appears next to me in his average height glory and I realize it's been over ten years since we last saw one another, yet he looks exactly the same.

"Time has not made you wiser," Birch says.

"Nobody said you have to pass an IQ test to be in the Trinity," I say.

Birch looks away and furrows his brow as if what I said didn't make sense. I've never had to take an IQ test because New America doesn't proctor them any longer. Can you pass or fail an IQ test?

"I sensed you were getting the shit beat out of you," Birch says. "I'm surprised you fell for this."

"Pierson looked like she was wounded," I say.

"Pierson directly told you the killer, who was both her and Easton, wanted you away from your house. Had you hung up the phone and kept reading your book, she would've had to call it off."

"You knew all of this and still let it happen," I say.

"If God doesn't intervene, why should I?" Birch says. "Besides, you made your need for independence clear when you ran off with the woman I was trying to date and left a dime at a private beach. Never mind that it was a dime that was in love with you."

He hasn't said Rossa's name yet, which makes me wonder if she still lives at Emerald Isle. Maybe he killed her? I assumed they were happily intermingling their genitals this whole time.

"Because of something that happens almost ten years ago," I say, "You let pale face and Reba kidnap me?"

"Easton plotted this for almost seven years, Goober," Birch says. "If you'd done any research on Lily McCord, you'd know he helped her out of the mental rehab hospital. His family owned the slaughterhouse where she killed people. Hell, he helped her lure people there."

Birch doesn't have anything to gain from lying to me. Why would Easton go to such trouble, though? None of this timeline makes sense to me.

"He wanted to see if you were on his side first," Birch says. "Again, you failed to do any research. Caplan wasn't next in line to take his job, and Pierson wasn't on duty when you first met. Had you actually done your own detective work, this wouldn't happen."

"Whatever," I say. "I'm not good at this. Thanks for reminding me. What are we doing about these two?"

"When I leave, the lights will go off again and they'll unfreeze," Birch says. "Since you're so against killing people, I'll spare them. You can decide what comes next."

This is my Batman moment. Easton and Pierson will think I somehow shut off the lights and escaped from my restraints. Then I can attack them in the dark. But what about the murders and fact that I'm bringing in two more corrupt police officers for APD to assume are guilty. My house is gone and I don't have anywhere to run.

"Jamron's house is getting dusty, by the way," Birch says. "Rossa hasn't been over to clean anything in years."

"So..." I say, "She's living with you?"

"Come find out."

The room goes dark again and I hear Easton trying the light switch. Getting off the table, I grab his head from behind and force his face into the wall a few times. Pierson says his name and I hear her walking behind me. Rather than sneak up on her, I walk in the direction of her voice and let myself run into her. Pulling her hair, I drop down to the cement floor and press all of my weight onto her.

"All the times I could've killed someone," I say, "I let them go. Most times it comes to bite me in the ass."

Pierson can't respond, but her muffled voice sounds more like pleas than responses. Letting her have a breath, I back hand her left cheek and punch down into her throat. From the gurgling sound she makes, I assume she can still breathe.

"Let's make sure you don't bite back."

Hoisting her onto the table, I tighten the restraints around her wrists and ankles. Now I have to attend to Easton, who is unconscious on the floor. When I reach down near the light switch, he's gone. What are the chances he's nearby with a stun gun? Surely its lost charge by now.

Instead, my car engine makes me jump off the floor before the headlights come on. I can just barely make out Easton's face as he hits the accelerator and puts the car into drive. People don't make smart decisions in last ditch efforts, do they?

Rather than hit me and causing me to fly into the air, I move out of the way and he wrecks my GM into Pierson. Well, the table folds in on itself like crumpled aluminum and Pierson turns into cocktail sauce. Why does Easton love destroying my property? That was all I had left other than the clothes I'm wearing, which are torn from the wrestling with those two assholes.

Easton's passed out with his head on the steering wheel. He falls out when I open the door with glass stuck in his forehead. I feel his breathing when I put a finger to his nostrils, so I get to relish watching him die.

"I still don't know why you did all of this," I say. "How'd you get Pierson and Caplan in on it? Out of the three of you, no one stopped and asked why you thought you could come up against me? Nero? I'm in the Trinity. You can't kill me. So why?"

The corners of Easton's lips curl. A smile more pronounced than Joaquin when I beat the shit out of him appears on the pale man. Bloodshot eyes with black pupils glare at me under a broken crown of glass.

"Picture yourself in your forties," He says. "The government budget only allows seven days of your time to solve a crime. Years and years of false starts lead to nothing. Then an anomaly appears and tries to fix us. He thinks he can help, but he doesn't follow the law. After all that failure I had to stomach, I watch a kid in his twenties who's able to fix what I never could. You think APD ever liked you, Nero? The police hate you. Making us all look like castrated animals chewing cud while you save Atlanta. One man does what fifty of us can't. You had a big house, you can eat anything you want, and you had three cars. Now I've destroyed everything you have and you can feel what you made all of us feel."

He thinks there's a point to this. I was hoping this wasn't in vain. Then I hear the police sirens. If these two wanted to frame me for the murders, standing over their bodies isn't going to help my case. There's a chance Easton might survive, though. Why does he get to live after this? Allowing all of this chaos just to destroy my life.

"If you had it in you to say all that," I kneel down, "Then you have enough life left to point your finger at me for what you did."

"I hope to sit next to the judge when he puts you away, Nero."

"You didn't consider the possibility that I'd kill you?"

"You never kill. Besides, they'll walk in on you with their stun guns ready and you can't risk them seeing you like that."

"Sure," I say.

The police are already slamming their doors and readying their weapons. Birch probably knew about this too. With my car totaled and only one way in and out of this place, I don't have the option to run. However, I can barricade the door to stall them.

Shifting the GM in neutral, I pick up the front end of the car and force the rear wheels forward like a wheelbarrow toward the door. After tugging on the emergency brake, I run over to

the desk where Easton left the stun gun he used on me. A rusty pair of scissors sits in a cup with broken pencils.

Prying Easton's mouth open, I shove the blade onto his tongue and use both hands to slice off the red muscle. Of course, he might bleed out from this. I wipe the red from the table on his shirt before putting them back into the cup. He's trying to slide away and his mouth tight when I twirl him back and press the stun gun into his palm.

"Shoot me if you want to live."

I fall next to him and convulse as the police break down the steel door and crawl over the car into the warehouse resembling ants trying to barricade their queen's fortress. Shutting my eyes, I don't know if this will work. This was the best I could think up in a panic.

"It's Detective Easton," An officer calls. "Check that body over there."

Lots of feet run around me. It's not long before the attending officer says Easton's name over and over as he's finally dead. I figured if I am ever going to actually kill someone, I choke them to death or shoot them in the head. Instead, I cut a man's tongue off and he bleeds out next to me playing possum.

"Nero is passed out. Let's get him an ambulance."

I open my eyes and sit up because I don't want anyone who actually needs medical attention missing out because of me. The five officers all turn around to see me. I walk over to the GM and pull it away from the entrance, though none of them follow. They keep gawking like people on the street. Rather than stick around, I walk out of sight before running into the trees.

Without a place to sleep, no clean clothes, and nobody in town interested in helping me, I think Atlanta is dead to me. Actually, there's not much thinking going on right now. It's not my strength. None of it feels realistic. So much plotting against me and I ran away without the repercussions Easton hoped for. Maybe he was wrong about APD not liking me. Those men in uniform didn't reach for weapons when they saw me. They didn't salute me either, so I probably spooked them.

From memory, I know the walk to Emerald Isle from the nearest teleport terminal is thirty minutes. The grass doesn't look so uncomfortable in the moonlight, but I can't rest until I'm clear from anyone who can spot me. If the police audit the teleport booth in Atlanta, they'll see someone left for North Carolina. Their jurisdiction doesn't extend past Georgia, but North Carolina State Patrol could show up.

My feet drag on the gravel leading to the road I last saw Birch and Rossa. The ocean reminds me of boiling salt water fumes. My vision blurs because I keep yawning, so that person standing outside the house might only be what I want to see. I wave and they wave back.

"Can you hear me?" I call.

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"Rossa?" I call out. "Rossa?"

Prior to this moment, I know my sleep faced many rude awakenings. In the New American Army, I probably got eight hours of sleep in a week. But with Rossa, I always sleep until I'm ready to get out of bed.

Having a ceiling fan, broken planks, bricks, and roof tiles weighing me down, I need some help getting out. There's a chance that Rossa wasn't in bed with me. Maybe she went to the bathroom or the kitchen. It's dark and it feels late, but that might be the shit blocking the light from my eyes.

"Rossa?"

My left arm scrapes past something hard until I touch her with my fingertip. This is painful. I'm very new to this pain. Yes, I feel a punch to the head or when Rossa steps on my foot during an argument, but we don't bleed or bruise.

Each lung grasps at a breath, and exhaling claws at my chest. Muffled voices call out. Rumbles come near. Then a pair of eyes appear after someone pulls the shit from my face. Rossa's neighbor, Cyril, motions for his wife, Giuffria.

"Nero," He says.

"Get her," I say. "Rossa."

He looks at me a little too long and complies as they dig us out. Before my legs are free, I sit up and my spine cracks. Feels like I was held down underwater.

"There's an ambulance coming," Giuffria says.

"I'll be okay," I say. "What about Rossa?"

When I look, Cyril slaps Rossa's face. If he wasn't her neighbor for so long, I'd choke him out for that. There's a broken wooden beam sticking out of her chest, and our mattress resembles the floor of a slaughterhouse.

"I never thought..." Cyril says.

There's a brick wall sitting undisturbed that separates Cyril's townhouse from us. The other neighboring townhouse doesn't have any signs of damage either. Did a two ton Acme anvil fall from the sky and land on our home?

"They're almost here," Giuffria says.

"I can walk," I say. "Forget it."

"You could be bleeding internally," Cyril says.

"No doctor can fix me. If I die, I die."

"What about Rossa?"

"Do I look like a mortician?"

Life is the worst sexually transmitted disease, and it's always a terminal diagnosis. That might be a quote from some philosopher from old America. Think his name was Lange.

Rossa and I were doomed to living too long all because we came into the world at the wrong moment. Having known her for thirteen years, I suppose God gave her a release and I am still

limping in the moonlight like a smudged poem written by a scar faced drunk on a cocktail napkin. Holy fuck does it hurt to walk.

Collapsing on the cobblestone street, the ambulance stops before a tire bumps over my skull. The people in white look so blurry, I can't tell them apart, and their voices echo through a bottomless well.

The nurses can't penetrate my skin to insert an IV or draw blood. Lights go in and out as I can't help giving into the darkness. When I'm finally able to keep my eyes open, my bare feet look alien to me. Several of my toenails are broken or missing, purple welts look like camouflage, and a trail of red goes up my ankle, under the gown, and up to my chest. When I move my jaw, each ear pops and a warm sensation runs out of my nose. More blood.

If I'm still alive now, then I'll survive, but need time. The only person who could kill us is all the way in Emerald Isle. Maybe we pissed him enough to come for us. I haven't heard from Birch since 2137, though. Then again, he wouldn't need to be in Atlanta to hurt us.

After a nurse passes by and sees I'm awake, I hear her call out to someone else. A man with a shaved head, goatee, and tweed blazer knocks on the door. Doesn't look like a doctor.

"Mr. Sullivan?" He asks.

"Mmm hmm," I say.

"Detective Torrent," He nods. "I seem to recall your name being said a lot down at APD, and then suddenly nobody ever said Nero again. I was just a patrolman back then."

"They promote quickly," I say. "Must be high turnover."

"Well, when some of your best people end up dead one night under mysterious circumstances," Torrent shrugs.

"I don't know you, so you're not here for a cordial visit."

"Right. I'm actually here because there's a dead woman, who I know you didn't kill, but it seems people who spend any amount of time with you end up dead."

"I've never killed anybody," I say. "I'm sure you know that."

"That's what I've heard. Nero doesn't kill. It's sort of a silly rule for a guy who acts as an unlawful vigilante."

"I got more done than you all did for a while."

"Yep," Torrent comes closer. "I need to know if you have any idea why this happened. We can't find any evidence of what happened at all other than the house that's now a pile of bricks and wood."

"APD has fucked me over enough," I say. "So fuck you."

"Hmm," Torrent turns around. "We'll probably talk again soon. Or I will."

"Another one of you comes trying to talk to me," I say, "And I might just show you what method is a lot more effective than killing a man."

The next day when the doctor sees I'm able to walk without passing out from the pain, a nurse hands me a bottle of concentrated CBD and wheels me outside. My clothes are torn pajama bottoms, an oversized shirt covered in blood, and no socks or shoes. They really take care of their people here.

A teleportation terminal sits at the end of the street, so I direct myself to the Bank of New America. Looking the way I do, everyone will probably stop to look at me. How can I buy new clothes when everything I owned was destroyed? I don't even have my debit card.

"Sir," The security guard walks up to me in the lobby. "Can I ask you to step over here for a moment?"

He's about a foot shorter than me, as most people are, and maybe two-hundred pounds. I could lift him up by an ankle and twirl him around over my head. Not that I'd want to.

"I'm here to be issued a temporary card," I say. "You can talk to me when I have new clothes."

"Well, we can't have you coming in here..."

I grab his left ear and kick his gun holster off the faux leather belt. Everyone in here will soon recognize me, so maybe they'll realize what I'm going through.

"I need a temporary card," I call to a teller. "My name is Nero Sullivan. You know who I am."

"Please," The guard clenches.

"I will hang you by your cheap trousers if you don't shut the fuck up," I say.

A lady with heels clacking against the tile floor comes over with my new card. When the guard falls to the floor, I head outside figuring I'm going to have a cop stop me before I can make it to the Hatcher Clothing Store down the block.

Wearing out the only pants that will fit me, a pair of black slacks meant for funerals, and a white undershirt someone found in the back, I now have to face the reality that I am homeless once again. My last home met a similar fate to Rossa's townhouse back in 2137 thanks to some crooked cops. Had she not died in the incident, I'd assume the cops found me again.

Funny. If Birch wanted us dead, surely he'd know I survived? Wouldn't he want the job done right? Teleporting to Emerald Isle, I rent a bike from a stand and pedal toward the beach. Feels like gravel and sand grind in my joints. I take a breather once I get to the hill that leads to Birch's road.

I never know what to think of the old man. He looks younger than me, but he's older than New America. If he looked his age, maybe I'd see him as a father figure. Instead, we always got on each other's' nerves and he bailed me out when I was really in a bind.

Rather than ride up the hill, I walk next to the bike and have to breathe through my mouth. As my lungs cramp, I finally see down the long road that leads to Birch's house, the horse stable, and empty plot where I used to live.

But nothing's there. I jump on the bike to coast down, and only the stable remains intact. Birch's house looks like a bigger pile of wood than what I left behind. The closer I get, the more I know that he's gone. Not like out of the state gone either. There's a sensation telling me he's not with us anymore. Probably not dead, though. That'd be his wet dream.

Still, I run over to the remnants of his home and pull away the scraps to see if he's buried underneath. Then I see a huge divot in the sand. Perfume and smoke have me looking around for the source. Through a gray cloud on the shoreline, a woman appears. Last time I saw her, she had dark blonde hair and extremely blue eyes, but all of her features softened since then.

"You're going to be very lonely if you don't make new friends," Lilith says.

"I'll get to work on that after you tell me what happened," I say.

"I suppose even the world's worst detective couldn't piece together a destroyed house and missing person."

"Just tell me."

Lilith looks up at me and tries touching my shoulder, but I grab her wrist and push away. Having lost my girlfriend only yesterday, I'm not about to dive into Satan's butthole.

"Birch tried to kill himself," Lilith shrugs. "This time he took you two down with him."

"Where is he then?" I ask.

"If I had the answer, I would have told you, Nero."

"Then why are you talking to me right now?"

"Do you not want my help?"

"No," I say. "If Birch is gone and not coming back, I have no use for you."

"You're the last of the Trinity now, Nero. Without Birch as the figurehead, you're going to see a new generation come together in the next two decades."

Satan misleads no matter who dons the title. When Birch took Satan's Earth form down in 2127, he effectively ended future generations of the Trinity. Lilith only wants me to be paranoid. Rather than telling her to go to Hell, I go back to the bike and get ready to go back over the hill.

"Let me do you a favor," Lilith says.

A second wind flows through me as I feel all my wounds, bruises, lungs, and muscles repair. I wouldn't have thought to ask for her help in that regard.

"My cordial gratitude," I say. "Or whatever."

"Your job is to balance Good and Evil in the world, Nero. You can't only have Good, and as the only remainder of the Trinity, you can't keep pretending to be above killing people."

"Maybe I'll start with you," I say.

It's a lot more brief seeing her leave than when she's theatrically appearing in smoke. She was right that I am the last of us, and I have responsibilities. I'm going to rebuild what I started in Atlanta and perhaps expand my scope beyond my hometown.

2141

With my remaining money, I'm able to clear the land I left behind in 2137 and rebuild a home, though not as extravagantly as before. Instead, I'm living in a one bedroom, one bathroom home. Since I don't own a car, I didn't see a point in building a garage. The little money I have left goes to food. When that's gone, I'll have to walk down my long driveway and teleport to the soup kitchen. New America doesn't have property taxes, and they offer basic food service to the homeless and low income families. I'm hoping to work around that, though.

Even if I had the low moral tact to rob a bank, it wouldn't be difficult to track down the one guy in Atlanta that looks like me. Occasionally, someone shows up at my gate offering me money to kill someone. Again, the APD wouldn't have to look far. One witness or fingerprint left behind, and my house would be demolished again.

In my situation, I'm not able to find a real job, and I'd rather bury myself alive than rejoin the military, especially at my age. I turn forty next year. Despite my invulnerability to physical damage, I feel those thirty-nine years whenever I finish half a set of pushups. Given my dwindling funds, I only eat breakfast and dinner. Without gaining weight, I'm still able to jog around the property.

Today when I locked the gate and start the short hike to the main road, a white Jeep comes toward me. I only know one person who had an old car like that, and she usually kept a dog in the passenger seat. Why would she come all the way here from Portland, though? That Jeep shouldn't risk the drive.

She's still tall and thin with new white streaks through her hair, but she definitely wears almost twelve years on her face since I left her apartment. I hope her investments came through and she's got a real house now.

"The world's a much less interesting place without you making headlines down here," Prudence says.

"I didn't realize I had a fan club," I say.

"I've always been a fan of you, Nero. The feeling apparently wasn't mutual."

"You're familiar with property rights. Why are you trespassing in my driveway?"

"Because you're about to have a lot of people trespassing on your property in North Carolina. I got a courtesy call from my former employer. Birch left you the whole of Emerald Isle."

"Too bad I can't afford a fence to cover it," I say.

If Prudence follows the news, she knows my assets are almost drier than her vagina. I don't have a reason to dislike her, though. Well, she was a supporter of former President Hatcher's Republican ideals that his cult-like followers wouldn't shut up about even when I was hanging out in those Portland hipster bars. Real estate agents don't have a goddamn soul.

She's only here for a cut of the sale, because that's a lot of money. In all likelihood, Prudence stands to profit more through development deals after the sale.

"You have an interested group of buyers," Prudence says.

"How much?" I ask.

"Two million," Prudence says. "Like I said, they're a group of buyers. You and I both know no one has that kind of money alone."

"The McCord estate does," I say.

"You will have that kind of money when you give me the go ahead."

"I have a counter offer then."

Stepping right on her, I wrap my palm around the back of her head. She's still using the same funky smelling shampoo.

"Birch had other assets," I say. "Find out where he banked and have the funds transferred to me. Then we'll talk about the deal."

"The Supreme Court seized his money," Prudence whispers right in my mouth. "Don't you watch the news?"

"Four million," I say. "You're going to make more than that in the end."

"Two is as high as I could get them to go."

"I guess I'll have to shop around. Maybe pay a visit to your group of investors the way Hatcher hired Birch to get a second term in office?"

Once again, I'm in the Bank of New America, but wearing somewhat nicer clothes. Prudence and the branch manager sit across from me in a conference room meant for at least sixteen people. Bastard didn't bother even turning on the lights. I suppose if it wasn't raining, we'd have more natural lighting instead of a lamp possibly manufactured in 1940.

"Mr. Sullivan," The manager says, "The Glass Onion Reality Company is authorized to transfer the total of three million, five hundred thousand, and three dollars to your account. The New American Supreme Court is taxing you down to an even two million."

"Holy fuck," I say.

"Good thing you negotiated for more," Prudence says.

"If you accept this amount," The manager continues, "You are relinquishing all property rights to Emerald Isle, North Carolina. Does this sound acceptable to you?"

"Why not?" I say.

Outside the bank, I am once again a millionaire, though I still feel like the broke bum living in a small house on too much land. I plan on expansion, of course. First thing, I'm buying a car, though I have to order one from the Genetic Motors plant from Texas. Of course, I'll need another one in matte black if I'm going to go back to being the guy breaking skulls and tying dudes to skateboards.

"So do you need a ride back to your place?" Prudence joins me on the sidewalk.

"I have to make a phone call," I say. "You can go back to pretending I don't exist now."

"Well, I'd be remiss if I didn't advise you as your agent to sell that property in Atlanta and stop pissing off the police department."

Much like how I left things in Portland, I walk away without a proper goodbye. Plus, I'm hungry and haven't had lunch in a year. There's a chicken wing place on North Avenue I want to try.

Money isn't going to make all my troubles go away. Prudence was right about the APD. While they've left me alone for a little while, there's tension because we both know I'm coming back. In what capacity, I'm still unsure.

Jack Rabbit's Wings smells like a mixture of buffalo sauce and lemon, and there's a decent crowd inside, but plenty of seats. Once I have my garlic parmesan wings and a jar of sparkling apple

cider, I get in the corner facing outward. I'm three flats in when I recognize Detective Torrent's bald scalp reflecting light as if he has a mirror on his head. I find it a little rude that he sits across from me without asking.

"I think we need another pandemic," I say. "I wish more people were germaphobic."

"I wouldn't be in here if I didn't need to talk," He says. "I'm a vegetarian."

"Order celery and get away from me then."

"Now that you're back on your feet," Torrent says, "I can't wait another second to ask for your help on something. It'll keep you out of our patrolmen's territory, and no one will mind you taking on these people."

"I seem to recall another cop trying to get my help on something and they tried to torture me in a warehouse."

"And they're dead, aren't they? If I had a death wish, I would dress up as a woman and go for a walk at three in the morning. Listen, I'm going to get the point. I know you have a soft spot for helping kids. This is one of those cases. Boys and girls from ages six to twelve are going missing. I'm talking prepubescent and school age. If an eleven year old boy has so much as a leg hair, he's safe. But we just had a school shooting last Friday. Did you hear about that?"

"Apparently, I really need to get a TV," I say.

"Twelve year old boy," Torrent pulls a photo from his jacket. "Tyson McDonald. He had a police issue 9mm and showed up to school on time for the first time in a month. When his teacher went to call his parents to tell them he'd come to class, he started unloading. Not aimlessly, either. The teacher lived, but she's still in the hospital recovering. Want to guess who he targeted?"

"You're the detective," I chew on my chicken.

"Girls who had developed breasts. Boys who had any signs of facial hair. I mean, he killed six of his classmates."

"So you're thinking sex trafficking and reconditioning?" I ask. "Some group of people are kidnapping kids and we're about to see an uptick in these shootings."

"You're not as dense as I thought. We don't know shit about it, though. That boy, Tyson, shot himself before we could even get on the scene."

"You also don't have the manpower to secure every school," I say. "Unfortunately, it's going to happen again."

"From what I heard about you and know regarding the post office incident, you staked out the place and found Lily McCord. You can't patrol every school either, but I don't know of any other way to catch up to these people. Whoever they are."

What Torrent is telling me probably goes beyond even my lifespan. To establish this kind of network of abducting children of a specific age range and slowly indoctrinate them takes not only time, but also money and manpower. Tyson likely spent years in this system.

"I am ordering a couple of vehicles," I say. "It'll be a few days before I'm able to really hit the streets. I'll need a police scanner too."

"We're anticipating another shooting in two days," Torrent says. "Any possible patterns are what we're looking out for."

"Can you possibly issue an order to shut down the school system on Friday morning?"

"I'd have to get approval from the Supreme Court. That would take a lot longer than two days."

"Oh," I say. "I think I can buy us time on that."

"I won't ask any questions," Torrent says. "But I'll get back to you."

Maybe intimidating the members of the Supreme Court isn't the answer? I recall thinking about blowing up the post office to catch Lily McCord, but instead spent time surveilling everything. What I need is access to lists of missing children, which could be hundreds.

"Wait," I tug on Torrent's coat. "Can you give me a list of every missing child within those age ranges?"

"God," Torrent rubs his head. "Come by the station in about two hours. I'll get you what you're looking for."

"Better if you can meet me. You don't want anyone seeing you talking to me over there."

Once I get on the phone with the GM plant in Texas, I order a Sarmenti in matte black and Thoroughbred in red. Then I call my old architect and contractor about expanding the house. I just need more room and a garage, I suppose. A second bathroom is always handy for when I clog another toilet and have to run through the kitchen with my pants to my ankles.

Even if children are dying, I have to carry on my personal business. I'm not a good detective so much as someone who can insert himself into situations better than others. There's no risk of injury or death. Everyone else is limited by their mortality.

I have to carry the box of missing children's files over my shoulder all the way up my goddamn driveway and there's not a relief when I drop it on my bed. Instead, my muscle stings and I lie down for five minutes before opening the cardboard top.

Torrent said there are one-hundred-and-seven missing kids from ages six to twelve. Tyson's photo is on the top. He'd been missing for two years. I immediately assume he was kidnapped when his tormenter thought he was still fresh, and they trained him to use a gun and sent him to school just before he lost his ripeness.

Are the kids who survived potential targets, or was the attack merely a test? Perhaps a distraction? There're definitely more missing girls than boys. The girls tend to run young, while the boys are the ones missing for years and aging out. Once I organize each age group, there're four boys around Tyson's age. Two of them go to Central Elementary and are in the sixth grade. The other two go to Barack Obama Elementary, which is where Tyson shot himself.

What bothers me about Torrent's story is that Tyson wouldn't have an assigned teacher or classroom since he was missing for two years, which means he picked a random room. Perhaps that's what he's feeding to the press?

Only one student of the four went missing within the school year: Citadel Roberts. I could call Torrent and tell him that the most likely candidate for a mass shooting Friday is Citadel, but I'd like to keep my contact with him to a minimum. However, I need to find out this kid's class schedule. His mother's phone number is listed in his file.

"Is this Citadel Roberts's mother?" I ask.

"Who is calling?" The woman asks.

Do I tell her my real name or act like I'm a police officer? At this point, she may not even trust the police anymore.

"I'm a private investigator," I say. "My name is Sullivan."

"Well, yes, I'm Lorna Roberts. Why are you calling?"

"I just need one little piece of information if you don't mind. Do you happen to know your son's class schedule?"

"Oh," She says.

I hear her open a drawer and go through some papers before talking to herself and verifying what she has.

"I'm sorry to keep asking," She says, "But why do you need his class schedule?"

"I don't want to alarm you, Lorna. The thing is that APD is concerned about a situation that happened last Friday. Did you hear about any school shooting?"

"Of course, I watch the news. Are you saying my son is going to be involved in something like that?"

"What I can say is that I'm going to Central this Friday morning, and I'm going to be listening for any disturbances, but I am also going to keep an eye out for your son, because he might be the next Tyson McDonald. If you help, I can make sure your son doesn't harm himself or anyone else."

"How are these kids even connected?" She asks.

"I hope they aren't, Lorna. My hope is that I'm just going to get upset because I woke up for nothing come Friday morning."

"Alright. He has home room with Mrs. Brown in room 501. At 8:30, he goes to Math and English with Mrs. Lamb in 504. He goes back to home room for lunch around 12. Then he has history and science in home room until 2:30. Christ, I haven't had to pick him up from that school in so long."

"I'm really sorry," I say. "I hope you get to see him again. I have a stack of children who have gone missing, and I'm working to help all of them."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Sullivan. If nothing happens, would you mind giving me a call?"

"Sure, Lorna."

Without my cars arriving yet, I'm walking to Central at seven in the morning from a teleportation terminal. That bastard kid better show up with an assault rifle if I'm going to put up with this shit. Obviously, I'll stick out around a crowd of people who are mostly under five-feet-tall, so I wear a blue dress shirt and black Chinos so I at least look like a teacher while I wait near the school grounds.

No sign of Citadel or a rocket launcher. By the time all the kids are inside, a bell rings, so I assume they're all going to be in their classrooms. I head in to find five-hundred hall and keep my ears open for any gunshots or screaming. I get to 501 and look in the little window. Still no Citadel.

I suppose he could show up later, or maybe next week. Maybe he's already dead. In any case, I go to the bathroom and pee in a urinal that's too low to the ground. Who was the other kid Citadel's age from Central? It would be too ironic if I heard a gunshot now and it wasn't Citadel.

I'm headed back to the front of the school when I see a kid looking down at the floor while they're practically power walking through the hall. This early in the morning, I can't imagine a teacher let a student go to the bathroom, especially with their book bag on. Something about the highlights in their hair doesn't sit well with me either. While a real estate agent like Prudence will get their hair colored monthly, most New Americans retain their natural hair since the chemicals are so expensive.

"You late?" I step in front of them.

When the kid looks up, I see Citadel Roberts through overgrown bangs covering his eyes. With my left knee, I punt him to the floor, kneel down to press against his chest, and pull away his bag. Then I pat down his waist to make sure he's not hiding a weapon.

"Let me up!" He screams. "Get off!"

"You've been missing for months, kid," I say. "What's in the bag?"

As Citadel screams and teachers are coming to their doors, I unzip the book bag to find a police issue 9mm stashed between two heavy textbooks. Pulling the clip from the gun and stashing the ammunition in my back pocket, I grab the kid and hoist him over my shoulder.

A patrol car screeches in front of the school as Citadel is shaking and crying like a newborn baby. The officer starts toward me until he gets a better look at my face.

"Nero?" He says.

"Call Detective Torrent," I say. "Tell him I found one of his missing kids."

"You have to put that kid down, Nero," The officer says. "Let's go to the station and figure this out."

"This boy and Tyson McDonald had police issue guns," I say. "Do you think I'm going to trust anyone in your department to look after him?"

Rather than teleporting to my house, I set the terminal to send me to Austin, Texas. Back in 2127, I bought an entire apartment complex, and each floor was an open space loft. While I lived on the top floor, I had another floor for my home gym and a special place intended for my father to die. Fucking asshole escaped and Rossa shot him in her kitchen.

No one was interested in buying the place from me, so it's sat here all these years without a tenant. In fact, most of the buildings in the area are empty. That's why no one runs out to help the screaming child I'm carrying inside. I had a little more money in the 2130's because I sold another investment property in Austin with the help of Prudence.

Setting Citadel on a weight bench, I grab the rope I used for Kyair and secure the boy's upper legs so he can't run away while we're talking. I'm not going to torture a twelve-year-old boy. However, I'm curious. Holding his chin still, I run my pinky across his upper lip, and there's definitely some hair coming in. His voice hasn't started breaking yet, though.

"I called your mom the other day," I say. "She's the one who told me where you classes were."

"Let me talk to her," He says. "Tell her where I am."

"No one is going to come looking for you here," I say. "If you want to go home, you're going to have to talk to me."

"No, I'm not talking to you about anything."

"Who gave you the gun I found in your book bag?"

He tries pulling on the rope I secured him with. Since he's being a little shit, I want to pull on his hair, but I bet he's endured worse. Instead, I go over to the sink and there're a pair of scissors in a drawer. As I approach him, I make every step audible by stomping a little as I clip the scissors to taunt him.

Pinning him to the bench, I start cutting strands from his overgrown, bleached hair. Each try he tries to pull away, I hold him by the jaw and snip the blades near his eyes as a warning. While he's a child and clearly conditioned to hurt other kids, I need him to cooperate with me. His attitude tells me he's unwilling to talk, so I'll break him down.

"You want to answer my question?" I ask. "Where'd you get the gun?"

"It doesn't matter what I tell you," He says. "They're coming for my family."

"Who?" I ask. "All because you didn't get to shoot up your classroom?"

"I said it doesn't matter!"

My landline is upstairs, so I walk slowly to the elevator so the kid doesn't see my anxiety. I may have saved Citadel's classmates and teacher, but I don't think he's lying to me about his captors going after his parents. As soon as I'm on the top floor, I run to the kitchen where the phone is mounted and dial the APD.

When the operator answers, I ask to be transferred to Detective Torrent. After a two minute pause, he gets on the line.

"What you got for me, Nero?" He asks.

"Citadel Roberts," I say.

"I heard you ran off with a kid this morning. Where are you, Nero? I need you to bring him in."

"He says whoever kidnapped him is going to kill his family since he didn't get to go through with the attack this morning. Get someone over to their house, Torrent."

The phone crackles and I hear Torrent instructing someone to send two patrol cars to the Roberts' residence. If this group is organized well enough, they're already dead.

"Dispatch says they already have someone over there," Torrent breathes into the receiver.

"Are they alright?"

"No word yet. I need you to come back to the station with Citadel or I'm going to have to charge you with kidnapping."

"You know I can strap a bomb to my body and blow up that whole fucking police station, right? I'll fucking drown you in the sewer for fun, asshole."

I hang up and go back downstairs to deal with Citadel. He's trying to get out of ropes when the elevator doors open, so I push him back down and backhand him in the cheek. Admittedly, I don't have any excuse to hurt this kid other than getting information. I'm only furthering his trauma. However, if both of these little gunmen had police issue 9mms, then the APD might have a few officers involved in this behind the scenes.

"Your parents are dead," I say. "They're fucking lucky, unlike you. Little shit. I'll keep you here as long as I need to. You'll only wish you were dead like them."

"I don't know any of their names," Citadel says.

"Who?"

"The men who took me. I saw some faces, but just the ones that hurt me."

"Hurt you?"

"Yeah. They had sex with me."

Jesus, I didn't want to hear that. So whoever took him used Citadel for a plaything and taught him how to shoot. Didn't take much conditioning if he had to do it to save his family.

"You don't know where any of them are or where they kept you?"

"I was dropped off this morning and told not to look back after they took the hood off me. They said if I didn't kill someone, then they'd kill my parents."

"Did you know Tyson?" I ask.

"No," He shakes his head. "I didn't know anyone else. I thought it was just me."

"Doesn't give me much to go on, kid."

"I'm sorry."

Looking away, Citadel's tears finally break through. He was never in fear of his own life today. Only for his parents. To him, I'm the reason they're dead. Whoever kidnapped him is also probably aware that I'm involved now.

"Your life is going to go on, Citadel," I say. "I'm not taking you back to Atlanta, though. Whoever did this will kill you too. You get to start over as long as you never tell anybody what happened."

"Where are you going to take me?" He sobs.

"Do you like dogs and cold weather?"

2142

Michael Pulaski leaves the Atlanta Police Department at seven PM, walks to the nearest teleportation terminal, and a couple of blocks later he takes an elevator up to the eleventh floor of the Wolf's Knob apartment building. He lives with his wife, Maddy, and a mutt they call Rice. She has his dinner ready only a few minutes before he opens the door and kneels down to pet the dog.

So far, I haven't found any deviation in his routine. It turns out that most officers are boring outside of work. Before Pulaski, I spent the last few months following his buddies on the force. Since I relocated Citadel, I get to spend Fridays stalking around Atlanta's school system. His dubious friends haven't shown back up for another twelve-year-old reject delivery. All the cops I've studied have been clean. The 9mm I took from Citadel was from the APD stock, so someone wearing blue is involved.

The metal door for roof access opens and Detective Torrent's baldhead gives him away even in darkness. I guess he's not such a shitty investigator if he was able to find me.

"Find any incriminating evidence on my guys?" He asks.

"Not Pulaski," I say. "Although, I haven't taken a close look at you yet."

I stand over him and take the glasses from his face since they're shining too brightly in the light. They might catch Pulaski's attention. Hopefully the sound of them breaking won't be heard by anyone either.

"Your tactics need work," Torrent says. "You forget I came to you for this."

"The 9mms came from your department," I say. "I only have a few more officers, but if you want to cooperate, I'd like a list of former officers from the past five years."

"I can't help you with that since my commissioner put me on new cases. He says we've spent too much time on this."

"Good thing I don't have a boss."

"Doesn't mean you don't need allies, Nero. Men like Pulaski aren't the enemy."

"What these kids like Citadel Roberts go through is worse than death. They'd all be better off in a line up getting shot in the head one by one. One bad cop makes you all the enemy. I tried working with your ilk years ago, and your whole fucking lot treated me like a criminal."

"That's over, Nero. I..."

"You need to be an example for your people. I don't think the issue is with just a bunch of sick sex cultists."

I go to the edge of the roof and look down to Pulaski's apartment. Considering my place in the world, the last part of the Trinity, I am responsible for balancing Good and Evil. Unfortunately for my morals, my unwillingness to kill someone will only get me so far. Birch never wanted to hurt anyone either. The thing about ending a life is that an adult has already chosen their path, and sometimes that hurts other people. The idea of strapping a bomb to myself and destroying the entire police department doesn't sound so cold blooded considering they're all covering for someone.

"I might be able to get a list of everyone who's checked out a firearm," Torrent says, "But that would be pretty extensive."

"You would have done that already if you actually cared," I say. "I suppose I'm a failure in that regard too. Do you know how many lives would be saved if we stopped being so merciful to the people who cause the most pain?"

"Sounds like you need to get into politics."

I hold out my hand for Torrent to shake as I let out a little laugh. He takes it good naturedly and doesn't resist when I pull him to me. We fall with my face toward the ground, and he screams just before we collide with the asphalt. With my weight on top of Torrent, there's no way he'd make it.

The few people on the sidewalk keep walking. That's New America. Don't stand in the way of other people's savagery unless you want to get hurt too.

While I'm able to walk away from killing a man for the first time without sirens and guns behind me, Torrent wasn't tried before a jury of his peers. I decided that the APD needed to know how far I'm willing to go for a change. My kindness in allowing them to keep living went unappreciated too long.

Still, I think of the man I called my father and the values he instilled in me. Lying on my couch, Torrent's blood stained all over my clothes, I see us falling over and over. The sound of his bones breaking under me with a sickening squish of fluid. The experience of ending a life must be the lowest a human can sink, because I don't know how anyone can acquire a taste for it.

Stripping down, I toss the clothes into the fireplace and light some newspaper to get the blazing started. Smoke begins to pour in the room, so I have to reach up and open the chimney vent since I keep it closed for bugs and birds.

After I take a shower and towel off, I go to put out the fire and dust the remnants into a hemp paper grocery bag. As I'm cleaning, the bell to my front gate rings. No one should be here at this hour, so I finish up and walk over to the monitor in the hallway to see two APD cars and four officers waiting outside. They can't climb the new gate because of the protective blades at the top, so all they can do is stand around until I go outside.

Pulling on some fleece pants, I head down the concrete pathway and greet the police.

"Nero," One says, "My name is Officer..."

"Tompkin Paulson," I say. "That's Clinton Blackstone, Luke Newman, and Wallace O'Connell. How are you gentlemen?"

"We're here to escort you to the station," Paulson says. "We have multiple witnesses that state you were present at the death of Detective Torrent, so we are taking you in."

"Nah," I say. "Thanks for visiting, though."

I turn around to go and hear one of the officers trying to shake the gate open.

"If you don't come with us," Blackstone calls, "We'll have to call SWAT."

"Call 'em," I say. "You can all join Torrent soon."

"Is that an admission?"

I followed all of these men home for weeks to see if any of them were connected to the kidnappers. All of them were clean, though. However, I'm no longer an innocent man, and they're doing their jobs. Of course, they're guilty of the same crime Torrent committed. Their united front is bullshit.

"Let me open that gate," I call.

They stand back as the iron doors swing toward me. Blackstone and Paulson approach me as the other two pull their 9mms as a safety measure. The ones with the guns will be less difficult to chase down if they take off.

"Two of you," I point, "Will not be going back home tonight."

"You threatening us, Nero?" Blackstone asks.

Paulson tries prying me off Blackstone when I grab him by the hair and kick him in the stomach. Once Blackstone is doubled over on the ground, I reach my arm around Paulson's neck and remove his 9mm from his belt. Firing toward Blackstone's legs, Newman and O'Connell are screaming at me to stop while one of them tries calling for back up.

"Ahh fuck," Blackstone says. "He got me in the hip."

"Nero," Paulson says, "We didn't come here to start anything."

"Tell that to Blackstone," I say. "You cops need to know the hierarchy of power in this city."

"What's it gonna take to calm you down?" Paulson asks. "Hey Newman, O'Connell: Why don't you take Blackstone to the hospital, and let's leave Mr. Sullivan alone for the evening."

"No," I say. "You're all staying."

I let another round out near Blackstone, but it puts a hole in my lawn.

"I want each of you down on your knees inside the fence," I say. "Newman, you first."

"Oh fuck that," Newman says. "We got SWAT coming."

"They'll have to drive all the way up here," I say. "By then, Blackstone and Paulson are going to be bleeding to death. If you don't get down on your knees with your wrists behind your neck, I'm going to blow this fucker's head off."

Newman tosses his gun toward his car and comes onto the concrete driveway, faces away from me, and follows my orders as I motion for O'Connell to cuff him. When O'Connell follows suit, I push Paulson toward the pair and force him to cuff O'Connell. I put Paulson next to him before closing the gate.

"Here's protocol for the next sixty seconds," I say. "I'm carrying Blackstone to my garage, and all of you are going to walk in front of us. I have a cellar each of you will go into. I promise all of you will leave here alive if you don't mess up."

Once I lock the three officers in the cellar, I tie Blackstone up on the floor and pull him under one of my cars before jogging down to the two cars they left out front to turn off their lights before pulling them out of sight near the trees. If SWAT is actually on the way, they're going to at least be confused about the situation.

Five minutes later, I hear multiple vehicles pulling up the gravel driveway. From my porch, I see none of them have their headlights on, but they can't keep anyone in a half-a-mile radius from hearing the redneck security system.

I'd really like my gate to remain intact, of course. I greet them on the little stretch of asphalt between my fence and the gravel, and four men pop out of the back with old AR-15s as the driver fiddles with the loudspeaker.

"Nero Sullivan," He says, "You are under arrest for the murder of an Atlanta police officer and the assault of four other officers."

"Better make it five more," I call. "These guns won't stop me."

"Failure to cooperate will result in the United States Military seizing your property and..."

The men start shooting when I grab the end of a rifle and pull one of them toward me. Setting the SWAT officer down after slamming the butt end into his chest, I fire at the asphalt and headbutt the nearest one.

"Stay down," I tell them, "Unless you want a bullet through your scrotum."

With two officers remaining, they're backing up as they try reloading their magazines, so I run at both of them and grapple them to the ground. Someone tries hitting me in the back with a baton, and I look around to see the driver trying to take me on. I kick his left knee cap hard enough to hear a break in his joint.

"I fucking said to stay down."

"You gonna kill us all, Nero?" The driver spits. "You lost your mind now?"

"No," I say. "I'm looking for what all of you should have two years ago."

Leaning down to the driver's level, I pull his radio to my lips.

"This is Nero," I say. "I have four officers locked up. I'm about to send your SWAT boys back home. Until the person who stole 9mm handguns from your facility is brought to me, I will not let my hostages go."

"We're not leaving without all of you," The driver says.

Putting the end of the AR-15 in his mouth, I look at the others pulling themselves off the ground and walking back to the truck. Each of them nod as if apologizing, and I wink down at their friend.

"Why don't you go home, buddy?"

As the driver starts to return to the truck, his radio goes off and he looks at me.

"The commissioner and a couple officers are coming," He looks at me as if I raped his wife.

"I'll put in a new batch of French Toast cookies."

Once the SWAT crew clears out, I head back to the garage to let the other officers go. I'm afraid that I'm not an excellent host, so I know they'll complain about their stay later. None of them say a word when I escort them to their cars, which is nice.

I'm not about to make cop killing a habit, and certainly feel my move against Torrent was too rash and in the moment. However Evil I am as a result, the police are panicking. Even if the commissioner comes to me empty handed, he's going to lead me somewhere whether he's willing or not.

And if the military ever shows up on my property, I'm not going to have a choice but to kill every single person who shows up. I'm tempted to pay a visit to the President tomorrow and have him issue a cease and desist order to all law enforcement from contacting me. That might require a few injured Secret Service men.

A black car comes to the gate, and I'm standing on the other side with my arms crossed just ready for this bullshit. Two officers accompany this man who clearly threw his clothes on twenty minutes ago and hasn't maintained his white beard in months.

"Mr. Sullivan," He says, "I'm police commissioner Cullock. I understand you're following up on the case I ordered Detective Torrent to close. He informed me you were the person who removed Citadel Roberts from Central Elementary several months ago. While you saved numerous lives, we would've liked..."

"Shut up," I say. "You know what I'm looking for. Who took the handguns from your station?"

"I don't have an answer for that," He says. "We keep our firearms quite secure."

"You already know the gun I found on Citadel was from your station."

Opening the gate, I approach Cullock, but go around him to the two officers, who are armed with black 12-gauge shotguns.

"Get in the car," I say. "I need to speak to Cullock alone."

"They're not going to leave, Nero," Cullock says. "We came here to take you in."

When I turn to look at Cullock, he sprays mace in my eyes, but I know better than to double over. With my right elbow, I hit one of the officers in the nose and lock my foot around the back of his ankle so he goes down. The other one unloads a round, which almost knocks me down. Another shot hits me directly in the chest before I push the 12-gauge to the ground and bash my forehead into the officer's cranium. Cullock should've tried a tazer instead. My eyes hurt like nails are obliterating my irises, but I'm not knocked out.

"You come to my property and attack me," I say. "Trying to cover up for people who are taking children from their homes..."

I grab Cullock by the throat and lift him from the ground.

"...rape them, force them to murder other children, and dispose of them like they're dead mice."

When he hits the ground, the two officers try tackling me, but I drop all of my weight back on them so they collide with the car.

"Have we not injured enough of your men tonight, Cullock?" I ask.

"You stalked half of my boys and you still think a police officer did this," He says. "Do you know how many of us get killed in this city? How people will shoot a cop in the head and take everything he has?"

"Blaming criminals for your fuck ups," I say. "As if you wouldn't track down whoever shot a police officer with more vigor than some loon who sodomizes children."

A hard blow to the stomach makes Cullock's outlook change a little. Holding up his hands as blood shoots from his lips after a hard cough, he tries speaking through a rasp.

"You're right," He says. "I have to stand by my men. But none of them took a gun or even lost one in the last five years."

"Then who was the gun on Citadel registered to?"

"Caitbeth Pierson," Cullock says.

Last time I saw Pierson, she was dead in a warehouse. Makes sense if she and Detective Easton were linked to this. Of course, I can't assume anything since she died in 2137.

"You're all protecting the memory of a psycho bitch?" I ask.

"That's all the information I have, Nero," He says. "Come down to the station. We both know you killed Torrent, and he didn't deserve it."

"How many of your boys will come when I put a bullet in your face?" I ask.

"This isn't like Dracula. If you kill me, it won't stop the law."

"There is no fucking law, Cullock. That's why I do this."

"I'm going to request military intervention," He says. "You're just a murderer now, Nero."

"And if anyone wearing camo shows up on my property, I'll have their blood staining my clothes when I come to your door. You got a wife, Cullock? Maybe a daughter. Isn't her name Jennifer?"

"Heh," Cullock stands up. "I guess you already knew all about me before I pulled up here. You gonna come after my little girl if I don't stop? You gonna be a coward and murder my wife?"

"No," I say. "I'll make them watch while I tie you down, slice open your stomach, and let your dog, Vinnie, eat raw steak out of your open carcass. Then I'll cut off all their fingers and burn the ends of their open wounds. Maybe you'll survive and have to spend the rest of your life opening every door, cabinet, and container for them."

"Sick fuck," Cullock says.

"Commish," One of the officers says, "Torrent ain't worth this. Nero can't die."

"Yeah," I get right in Cullock's face. "Get the fuck out of here and keep your fat lips shut if you want your family to keep their digits."

2143

Running the footage from the cameras I installed around each school in Atlanta, I pop a chicken nugget in my mouth as I look for any vehicles that spend a little too much time around the area. Since I started picking up Torrent's slack on this investigation, Atlanta's missing children number hasn't dramatically increased. The downside to preventing more Citadel Roberts from happening is that whoever kidnapped the boys probably buried them somewhere.

Unlike movies from old America, children don't come in school buses anymore. It's rare that anyone drops them off in a vehicle. When Mansor Sean designed the teleportation network, his goal was to decrease motor vehicle usage, though it's my understanding most New Americans couldn't afford cars to begin with. My biological parents sure as hell couldn't.

If not at school or a public park, where do people swipe children? I know it can happen anywhere; even in someone's yard. But what I found with each of these cases is that their parents sent them to school and never saw them again.

I suppose they might have actors who pretend to be teachers or principals who walk a student off the grounds and into a van somewhere. I haven't seen any students leave the school during the day, though.

Back when I took extreme measures to shut down the post office, I went to a teleportation server room and shut everything in Atlanta down. As I recall, school was cancelled for a day too. Unfortunately for me, no one in New America is microchipped to determine who uses the terminals, so it's possible these kids like Citadel teleported to the wrong place and not by their own mistake. Too bad Mansor Sean died three decades ago. I have no idea who maintains the network now.

Because of the teleportation system, it's also not unlikely that these kids are taken all over the world. It was so easy for me to run away to Texas with Citadel.

I have to mull over the impossibility of finding these children each day. I think about them more than Torrent. Something about innocent kids suffering outweighs my guilt and the sounds of his body turning to jelly beneath me.

My actions against the police effectively made them afraid of me, though I find myself wanting to tell someone about my findings. They're no longer interested in these missing children.

However, I walk down the street, and most people nod and smile. Some men stop to shake my hand. Women motion for me to stand by their kids when they have to tie their shoe or have some other distraction. When I left in 2137, not many of them wanted shit to do with me.

If I stop pursuing these people or monitoring the schools, they may creep back to their old ways. The real lead I haven't pursued is Pierson. I thought I knew her before she tried to make me a guinea pig. Easton ran over her with my car as I recall, so there's no way she's alive and kidnapping children.

In the phonebook, there's only one person by the name Pierson. Either Cason Pierson is Caitbeth's brother or father. All I need to do is confirm he knows of her.

"Hello?" A man answers the phone.

"Yes, is the Pierson residence?" I ask.

"Yeah?"

"I'm calling from Birmingham Police Department and was hoping to speak with Caitbeth."

"Are you serious? Caitbeth died years ago."

"Oh, so sorry," I say. "Are you her father?"

Cason hangs up the line. I wonder what hour I should pay him a visit? His address is 127 Sherman Lane. Going to my office, I have to look for Sherman on my map of Atlanta because I've never heard of it. Turns out, it's an old residential street near Austell, but very few people live past the city limits. From what I know about old American history, most smaller towns lost their population in the 2020's since all the jobs moved to urban areas. Places like Bremen or Carrollton don't even have teleportation terminals.

The Sarmenti's engine is softer than the model I owned before. Since there's no traffic, I end up in Austell in half-an-hour. I'm not certain if I'm going to gain anything from harassing this guy. Either he's mourning the death of his daughter, or he's helping smuggle kids around the city.

With my headlights off, I can't see the mailboxes, but most homes on this street look abandoned. The only house with a light on inside has 127 posted on the door. If I pull into that driveway, there's a chance Cason will hear the tires over the broken concrete. Instead, I park in the grass across the street and softly shut my door.

Since it's only a little after ten PM, he's likely awake or only recently asleep. The garage is open with a Ford truck parked inside, so I walk up to the door and look in the window to see a dark kitchen and lights on in the den. Leaning out of sight, I try turning the knob and it's locked. I can't imagine anyone wanting to come all the way out here to rob this guy.

Rather than make a bunch of noise outside trying to find an open window or unlocked door, I put my fist through one of the small window panes to let myself in. Only a moment later, Cason Pierson looks up at me with a baseball bat in his hands. He's probably five-foot-ten, perfectly clean shaven, and not nearly as young as I'd thought.

"Get the fuck..." He starts.

I pull the bat from his grasp and place a hand on his lips.

"I was with Caitbeth the night Easton killed her," I say. "My name is Nero."

"Well, Nero, you owe me for the window you just broke, and I'm calling the police the moment I get your ass out of here."

Pulling the man over my shoulder, he tries beating and kicking me. After a pleasant stroll to my car, I drop him in the trunk and go to start the engine.

"What the hell do you want with me, asshole?" He screams.

Instead of taunting him, I turn right off Sherman and take us back to the ramp leading to I-20. As I hear Cason tumbling in the trunk, I try to see if this car will rattle some windows by pressing the accelerator all the way down until I get to the first Douglasville exit and go toward an abandoned motel.

We're not far from his home, but if Cason ran away, he'd have a hell of a time getting back. I didn't anticipate throwing him in the trunk and driving here. Am I going to drive him home and drop him off like a divorced dad on Sunday?

He tries landing his foot in my stomach when I pop the door. After a hard thud on the weeds growing from cracks in the parking lot, Cason crawls away toward an open room without a

door on the rusted hinges. All I have to do is stand on his back and listen to the breath push out of his mouth.

"Caitbeth," I say. "You're her dad, right?"

"Do I look like I could be her fucking dad?" Cason asks. "I'm her husband. Almost ex-husband."

Caitbeth didn't wear a ring, and she never told me about a husband. Plus, she was apparently fucking Easton for years. Hell, I don't even know the divorce process in New America works.

"She live with you before the end?" I ask.

"I had to move out a week before she died."

I take my foot off his back and nudge him over.

"I found out about her fucking that old guy and wanted her out," Cason says. "Instead, two cops showed up out of their jurisdiction and forced me out."

"Petty," I nod. "A kid came into Central Elementary with her gun in his backpack. He was going to be the second in a series of school shootings."

"So," Cason says, "You think I'd know who had something to do with that?"

"I figured you'd know something, especially if you were married to her."

Hopefully his shirt won't rip. Once he's off the ground, I toss him toward the GM and plant my foot in his ass.

"Cason, if you don't give me anything, I'm going to beat you 'til you bleed and tuck you into one of these moldy beds."

"Hey, dickcheese, what if I don't know shit?"

"I hope your lungs are stronger than your lies, then."

Cason waves and shuts his eyes hard. Even if he doesn't know anything about the gun, there's something about Caitbeth I don't know.

"Caitbeth wouldn't want to hurt children. Whoever took that gun was probably in the evidence room. I used to run inventory in there. I'm the one who got her the job with APD after her schooling."

"You fired or quit?" I ask.

"That piece of shit Detective she was fucking had me laid off. I have no idea who would've replaced me."

"So if someone got the gun from the station, is the evidence room easier than getting in and out of the armory?"

"Not even the commissioner has access to the guns. But hey, if a gun is sitting on a shelf with a tag on it, why wouldn't it disappear?"

"Okay," I say. "We're going back to your place. You're going to make a phone call to whoever was your superior officer before you left. Ask them who was over evidence when Caitbeth died. Tell them you want to know if they have her ring."

"No, sir," Cason says. "I am not talking to nobody from that goddamn police department. Go ahead and shoot me in the head or tie me upside down. Whatever."

"What's your aversion to the cops now?" I ask.

"Someone will hear the phone call. Someone a lot smarter than you. They'll come after me."

"And you don't know who?"

"I said they were smart."

I drop Cason off on his exit. He can walk the rest. Considering the options, I can either go find the officer currently in charge of the evidence room and shake them until they tell me. I doubt they know, though. The look Cason gave me communicated a fear that originates in someone else's murder. Someone sees something they shouldn't, and they die.

How many guns have ended up in that evidence room over the years, though? The only reason they had Caitbeth's was because she had it on her at a crime scene. I evidently need to entrap a cop and have them shoot themselves. Or I could get a 9mm and have someone else leave it at a crime scene.

A new fireworks store opened in Grove Park last week, and it looks like a shack someone used to cook human barbecue. However, I assume they have smoke bombs. I like the ones with different colors like blue and neon green.

Since it's late, the place is closed, but I make my way around back and find a small crate to carry inside. I'm surprised neighborhood kids haven't already looted the place and put it out of business.

I'm about to grab some smokers when I hear the reason why. A shotgun's pump sounds louder than church bells in this quiet room. I turn to see a guy in a white shirt, suspenders, and a burgundy tie sporting a salt-and-pepper mustache pretty appropriate for his age. He dresses well if he's the owner of this juvenile bait shop.

"Browsing for the holidays?" He asks.

"If you have pellets in that gun, you might blow this whole place up," I say.

"Slugs. I like to hit what I'm shooting at without cracking all the windows."

"You must not see well," I say. "But you can see my outline."

I walk closer and he puts the barrel right on my chin. If he shoots, it'll hurt, but he better have some jib left in his jive if he's going to outrun me.

"When that bullet bounces off my face," I say, "I'm going to hold you down and light one of these screamers in your ass."

"You want to steal so bad, fine. Take what you want."

He sets the gun on a display case and kicks the crate I took over. When I bend over to pick it up, he tries punching me in the ribcage, which mostly hurts his knuckles.

"So it's you," He says. "The big freak about town."

"Yeah, but usually people call me Nero."

"Well, call me Caesar Salad."

While I cram all of the smoke bombs into the box, the old man sits on a stool and lets out the most theatrical sigh I've heard since some college kids tried doing Shakespeare in Piedmont Park. His performance is more believable, though.

"What is this a front for?" I ask.

"You come here to bust me and take my cheapest products?"

"No," I say. "You happened to be closed when I needed these. I can pay you if you fire up your card reader."

"Take 'em. You're smart enough to know the loss won't really matter. I was only in here because my old lady's mad at me."

"You had nowhere else to go?"

"Bars are closed," He shrugs.

"What's your name, by the way?" I ask.

"Eddie," He says. "A good old American name for a New American asshole."

"How do you really make your money, Eddie?"

"Ah come on, nobody in this world has any money. I get by with a liquor store my family built in 2095 and occasionally winning at pool. With my eyes the way they are, I ain't winning much, so it's mainly the booze and fireworks that's getting us by."

"Say Eddie," I put the crate down. "How many of these would it take to fill a building with smoke?"

"You can get a room pretty smoky with a few, but all anyone's gotta do is open a window. If you're looking for something to get people out of a building though, I suggest putting a bunch of cherry bombs in a bag and tossing it down a chimney or vent. Something that loud will make a few people run."

"Well hell," I say. "I was looking forward to using the smoke."

"Why not both? Go for theatrics, kid."

Eddie follows me to my car and looks up and down the street as if patrolling for giant mutant rats ready to eat us alive due to an outbreak of some new virus. I'm hoping nothing in the car causes all these fireworks to go off in my backseat. I am missing one element, though.

"You know where I can find a pistol or revolver at this hour?" I ask.

"Expecting to run into Clint Eastwood come sunrise?" Eddie asks.

"Actually, I only need the gun. It doesn't even have to work."

"You never heard of a pawn shop, kid? Hold on. Stay right here."

Eddie goes back inside the store and returns only a moment later with a Colt Python with the shiniest wooden handle I've ever seen on a gun that old. The only legal manufacturing of guns in New America is for the military and police force, and neither are allowed to take their firearms when they're off duty. Of course, plenty of people break rules.

"Where'd you get all these toys?" I ask.

"You said it didn't have to work," Eddie says, "And that one don't work."

"Where's that liquor store of yours?" I ask. "I promise I'm not headed there next."

"Marietta Street. Now, let me go back to sleep. If you need anything else, please bother someone else."

I have to stop midway through climbing the metal ladder leading to the roof. The only issue is that someone might spot me panting and hoping my arms don't give out. I'm carrying a little more weight on my back, but I'm supposed to be a bit more durable than this. By the time I'm up there, I have to sit down against an AC unit and let my legs stop throbbing.

Pulling off the cap to a roof vent, I first drop in the smoke bombs, but I expect the cherry bombs to set them off. Maybe someone will hear the bag drop and try to investigate, which will let more smoke inside. Next, I light the wick of the bag Eddie helped be put together and drop the

cherries inside before capping the hole again. Before I even get to the roof access door, the fireworks start going off, and an alarm inside starts to sound.

I look down at the street leading to the entrance, and police officers start evacuating the building. I'm not sure how long I'll have to pull this off, but I imagine I'll see men from the fire department before I run into any cops.

The stairwell from the roof runs all the way to the first floor, so I put my legs over the railing, tuck my arms to my chest, and slip down hoping that I won't hit every metal bar or concrete step on the way down. My shoes crinkles under my feet when I hit the white tiles, and I look underneath to see my prints perfectly imprinted in the floor. So, I need to burn these shoes when I get home.

The evidence room is near the back of the office, and I'm coughing and struggling to see through the smoke while I make my way around random desks and chairs. Whoever was guarding this room left the door open, which is definitely against whatever protocol they're supposed to follow.

I'll tag the revolver and put it on a shelf after I print off the officer roster for this station. There's a computer near the door where all evidence is tracked, but each officer who maintains the evidence room for the day has to sign in. I'm hoping they keep the records as far back as 2137.

The printer from the movie *Wallstreet* starts grinding out the roster when I hear the fire engine sirens right outside the door. The funny thing is that I didn't plan a way to leave out of here. Was I going to climb back up to the roof? I can't leave out the front door.

With a wad of papers under my arm, I see their uniforms, but can't make out their faces, which means if I hunch down they may not be able to tell it's me. I go through the emergency exit, which leads to the same alley I came through to get to the roof. This time, there're two officers standing on the edge near the street.

"Ahh shit," One notices me. "Fucking Nero tried to kill all of us."

"Hey this is Tenpenny," The other officer turns on his radio, "We need all available officers..."

I kick Tenpenny in his testicles and snatch the radio receiver off his shoulder before head-butting the other officer.

"Keep your mouths shut," I say. "I know where both of you live. Tenpenny, you got that young boyfriend from Philly, right? Maybe I can have his balls bronzed for you."

"Okay," Tenpenny holds up his hands.

Rather than going directly home, I park my car at a waffle diner across from a teleportation terminal. I can go over this paperwork in Austin at my old apartment building while the police cool off. Tenpenny and his friend might still tell someone what they saw tonight. I'd hate to make good on my threat.

Before I brought Citadel here, I hadn't been in Austin for over a decade. I sort of forgot about the property. Unlike the land Birch left me in Emerald Isle, I can't flip this for a profit. Everything is covered in dust, including my bed spread, so I have to change the linens before I can sleep.

In the year 2137, the same officers maintained the evidence room in three shifts: Reginald Chase, Godfrey Little, and Shelton Moreland. After Caitbeth's death, Godfrey is absent from the roster. I'm sure if I went to the Atlanta Public Library and looked through the newspaper microfilm, he'd be listed in the obituaries or early retirement celebrations. His shift was five to one. If someone lifted the gun, it was probably after dark.

I'm not even sure what to do with this information. So, I put my bed clothes in the washing machine and take a nap on the couch.

That nap is interrupted six hours later when the sun comes through the floor-to-ceiling windows and I have to put the sheets in my dryer before they get stinky. How long until someone steals the gun I left in the evidence room and it ends up in the backpack of another kid?

Commissioner Cullock opens an evidence bag and tosses the Colt on his desk. This morning, Frisco Mana, an eleven-year-old student at Barack Obama Elementary, tried to use it and his teacher tackled him.

"We don't have a register on this gun," Cullock says. "It predates 2085. You know that you could've just asked to plant evidence in our lock up, right?"

"Then the person who stole it would've known," I say.

"Okay, Nero. You proved we have a security issue."

"I think I proved more than that."

"Sure. We have the officer in charge of evidence security on unpaid leave right now and we're investigating. That's all we can do. I already know you're not bound by the same rules as us."

The stolen Colt tells me two things: Someone is only taking the guns out of evidence because they're more accessible, and they're not very bright because they didn't test the gun first. Then again, they might have sent Frisco in with a broken gun to prove they're still out there. Frisco has been missing since 2140 and walked into his first grade class room, though.

"I'll let you know what I find," I say. "If you want to work on this together that is."

"You will no longer receive push back from us, Nero. You've made it clear you think you're above the law."

"No," I say. "I'm not interested in law. It doesn't apply to me at all. I was picked by God for this."

Each week, I have to change the batteries and SD cards in the cameras I keep at each school. Today, I actually have footage that I can use to get closer to these people. This only makes me anxious because I have to wait until nightfall and sneak around to get the footage, so I have a few hours to kill.

Eddie's liquor store, Old American, looks like it used to be a Piggly Wiggly. The floor tiles are older than Eddie. He's wheeling in cases of McCord Moonshine, which isn't as tasty as Arthur's Mash.

"Well, there's Frankenstein," He says.

"That gun you lent me came in handy," I say. "You hear about the kid who almost shot his teacher today?"

"I've been in here all day, and you don't see a TV in here, do you?"

"I don't know if it made the news yet. Just thought you'd want to know I'm a little closer to saving some kids."

"Hoorah," Eddie says. "You come in to buy another case of mash?"

"Sure, I'll take one. I think I've paid you back for the fireworks by now."

"God, I wish some kid would toss a match in that place and blow it up. Wait up at the counter and I'll bring your booze."

With such a big space, Eddie shouldn't be the only one working here, especially at his age. I'm not the kind of guy who drinks alone, so I have boxes of clear grain alcohol sitting in a closet. I'd throw a party, but that requires friends.

"How much it take for a big guy like you to get plastered on this shit?" Eddie asks.

"One jar full will do it."

"Jesus, if I drank a jar of this stuff, my wife would think she won the lottery."

I park down the street from Barack Obama Elementary and wait a minute to see if anyone's around. Exchanging the memory cards and batteries requires a little organization on my part, so I carry a case that separates them with labels for each position.

As I approach the lamp post across the school, I recall that Citadel's parents were murdered. However, I don't recall the police saying anything about Frisco's family. I also never saw the kid in person. Will he be returned to them with police protection? Maybe his former teacher was smart enough to warn the police over the phone or something. It's also possible his family moved during the period he went missing.

When I look at the footage, Frisco walked to the school; he wasn't dropped off like Citadel. Footage from another camera shows him leaving a teleportation terminal. Now I have to go look at the logs for that location, or I could call and ask.

"Atlanta Teleportation," A man answers. "How may I assist you?"

"You're located near the old Jefferson Tate campus, right?" I ask.

"Yes, sir, but our offices are closed for the evening. I'm the evening maintenance associate."

"I just need to know if you're there in case I have to come over. I need some information about the terminal down the street from Barack Obama Elementary."

"Unfortunately, that's not public..."

"Uh uh," I interrupt. "My name is Nero. You've heard of me."

"Oh," He says. "What do you need specifically?"

"Around eight fifteen this morning, a boy teleported there and tried to shoot his teacher. I need to know where he came from."

"Right, I'm looking through the log. Thank God you gave me a specific time, because so many kids go through in the morning. Looks like he came in from Chattanooga."

"Alright, thanks for your time."

I've never been to Tennessee other than driving through on the way to Portland. I guess I need to take a trip to Chattanooga in the morning. My earlier theory was that if this wasn't based in Atlanta, then the teleportation terminals helped conceal their identity and take the kids far from their homes, but it could just be that Frisco was sent to Chattanooga and back to Atlanta as a way to thwart snoopers like me.

Usually I slide the cases of whiskey I buy from Eddie across the floor and into the closet, but now I have to pick it up to stack on the others. The bottom of the box says it's made and shipped from Chattanooga, TN.

There's not money in liquor like there used to be. With Haptic Masks, people tend to zone out into their own worlds and don't need intoxicants. When I used to hang around Jenzy Loeb's bar where I met Rossa, the number of patrons was sparse. I never bought a Haptic Mask, though maybe I'd benefit from mentally checking out from everything.

The guy from Atlanta Teleportation didn't tell me where in Chattanooga Frisco came from, so I might as well go to Seattle. When I arrive, whatever expectation I had for the city makes me wish I'd stayed in Atlanta.

Every building I see up and down the street is abandoned. A bridge merging two sides of a river is missing a huge chunk in the middle, and the largest structures appear to have metal frames reaching upward, but they're hovering over empty spaces.

Looking at the map on the terminal, I have my answer about Frisco, because there's only one terminal in this county. So, I start roaming away from downtown and try finding actual people. No one is around me, so it feels like I'm investigating the aftermath of an atomic bomb.

When I get close to another section of the river, I see a power substation in front of a long building made entirely out of shiny dark wood. Sort of like the color you'd see on a barrel covered in lacquer. Unlike everything else here, remnants of old America, this place is relatively new. New construction is rare in New America because no one has the money for it.

An aesthetically similar sign swings from a post reading: New Brand Distillery. Apparently, this is where Eddie is getting much of his liquor from. This place is within walking distance of the teleportation terminal Frisco used.

A car is approaching from the far end of the road. The steel bars on the front tell me it's a cop. I doubt the police here are aware of me. It's also the only car I've seen on the road since I arrived, and the officer coincidentally is the only person I've seen.

"Morning," He waves with his window down. "You need any help, sir?"

"Umm," I walk a little closer, "I'm from Atlanta and just noticed this really beautiful distillery. I don't think I've ever seen a building like it."

"Yeah, well it's private property, and I got a call about someone wondering around the place."

"Oh, I've been on the sidewalk the whole time."

"Maybe just keep walking, okay buddy?"

"Actually, do you mind talking for a second?" I lean into the car. "There was an incident at Barack Obama Elementary yesterday and a suspect came in straight from that terminal over there."

"Sorry about that, but I have to make my rounds. Just move along."

"Who called you, by the way?" I point back at the distillery. "Do they not have security?"

"Please move away from my vehicle..."

I turn around and walk straight on the blacktop path leading to the parking lot. The officer exits his car and starts following me.

"Maybe we should have a quick pow wow?" I ask.

"Sir, if you don't get off this property, I have to take you in."

That's when I face the officer, who has to bend his neck up to see me, and cross my arms. He's protecting something. While this place may not be connected to Frisco or the kidnappings at all, I still have to investigate.

"You got a gun?" I ask.

"Yes, I'm a police officer..."

"Mace?"

"No, I don't personally carry..."

"What about a tazer?"

"Chattanooga police only carry firearms..."

"Who came up with that policy? There are no local laws."

It's true, though. When New America was founded in 2085, the president and supreme court are the two branches of government. There are no officially recognized state borders or county ordinances. I'm fucking with this guy, though.

"Sir, final warning," He says.

"You're gonna need backup to take me down," I say. "I'm just browsing."

He looks around me and I hear people gathering outside the distillery's entrance. Are they not busy enough inside to ignore one guy walking around out here? The officer draws his weapon and takes aim at my legs.

"Shoot," I say. "See what happens."

"Wait," Someone says.

A woman approaches us and holds up a hand to the officer.

"Oh, Miss Luna," The officer says, "Maybe you should wait inside."

"Hello, sir," Luna says, "I'm the day manager here, and I am the one who called for a courtesy officer to see about you being here. We do not have anyone on our roster for official business today."

"What about unofficial business?" I ask.

"If you need to be here for some reason, then you need to schedule an appointment."

"No," I say. "I'm now curious enough to actually walk inside and take a look. Since you called him here, I guess it's a question of whether or not you want to see me beat a cop up today."

"Okay, you just threatened an officer," The cop speaks up.

I only have to reach down a little to grab his right wrist and he discharges a round before dropping his gun. The shot makes all the looky-loos go back into the building. I pick up the man by putting both hands under his armpits and make him face me at eye-level.

"Have you ever heard of the Trinity?" I ask. "Birch?"

"Yeah," The man nods. "Are you Nero, the guy from Atlanta?"

"Yep," I say. "You wanna pick up your gun and leave now?"

After he agrees to go, I turn my attention back to Luna, who is even shorter than the officer. She's probably around forty, but I can tell her job must be difficult because of the gray steaming from her temples to the ends of her hair.

"Wanna give me a tour?" I ask.

"No," She says.

"Listen, I didn't even know this place existed five minutes ago. I came here for an entirely different reason. Now your reaction gives me reason to suspect that someone or something in this place is the root of my investigation."

"I can't have you disturbing my workers when they're around alcohol and other materials. We have a strict no-visitors policy."

"Then let me speak to the owner," I say.

"Could you just tell me what you're looking for?"

Another car arrives, but this time the driver isn't a cop. Chattanooga is overcast with absolutely no sign of the sun other than white light in the sky, and this man has on sunglasses. Luna

tries pulling me out of the way, and the driver holds up a hand as if to tell me to move. Instead, I stand directly in front of him with my legs against the front fender.

"Mr. Lauria," Luna waves him back, "Come back in about five minutes."

Opening the door, he leans his head out.

"Excuse me," He says.

"Are you the owner?" I point back at the distillery.

"Yes," He nods. "Could you please step aside?"

I'll follow him inside. He's not going to leave, obviously. Luna chases me as I follow his car to the parking lot, though.

"Are you his little bitch?" I ask.

"No, but I am the manager of the distillery," Luna says.

Lauria jogs up the steps and practically blips out of sight. The inside of the building smells like sourdough bread and vinegar with a little caramel. A staircase leads to a small office space. He collapses in a chair and tosses the sunglasses on a pile of paperwork before resting his forehead in his palms.

"Lauria, is it?" I ask.

He doesn't respond, but Luna runs into the room and tugs on my wrist as if I'm interrupting a master at work.

"If you don't get the fuck away from me," I say.

"This man just showed up and scared away a police officer," Luna says. "I can't get rid of him."

"Does the name Frisco Mana mean anything to you?" I ask. "Maybe Citadel Roberts?"

Lauria opens a fountain pen and starts signing accounting rosters. I find his silence rude but impressive. Then again, I might not intimidate him since he's six-foot-five and he doesn't have to look up to me.

"Look," Luna says, "He doesn't know those people..."

"I told you to fuck off," I say. "Jesus, did you forget what I did to that police officer?"

"Luna," Lauria says, "Go back to work."

There's another desk with a rolling chair which I steal to sit across from Lauria. The guy has a jawline that makes me look like a chinless wonder. After finishing his work for the day, which took all of sixty seconds, he looks up at me. While his eyes convey annoyance, the rest of his face resembles the statue of David.

"Oliver," He says.

"I'm sorry?" I say.

He exhales and looks at the sunglasses before giving me a half-assed smirk.

"Oliver," He says. "Conversationally, people tend to ask each other for their first names, which you have yet to offer."

"Nero," I say.

"Nero? Was your mother some sort of historian?"

"Never knew her. It's the Italian word for black. I wasn't named after anyone in particular."

"So Nero, why have you come here? Surely not to harass one of my employees for the hell out it."

"The names I mentioned early," I say. "They're boys who tried to murder their teachers and classmates in Atlanta. They were missing for years and once they got close to puberty, someone sent them to kill other children."

"Oh yes," Oliver says, "I've heard. Didn't know their names, though. I only pay attention to the news when I'm on it anyway."

I've never heard of Oliver, and didn't even know New Brand existed prior to my arrival. Considering he drives a newer model of GM, I'm guessing he's doing well for himself.

"Where'd the name New Brand come from, by the way?" I ask.

"My father built this place based on a recipe he said his great-grandfather made during the dark years. Unlike me, he had a sense of humor. New Brand seemed ironic to him for some reason. Very to the point."

"He still with us?" I ask.

"He passed away last year," Oliver says. "Now, I have more work to do and I'm sure you have other people to bother."

"Actually, I think I'm going to need a little more of your time, but first we need to work on your lack of respect for me."

Rather than chew me out for being so audacious, Oliver opens a drawer, puts a file folder inside, and opens a new one to begin signing more papers. This is my cue to push everything off his desk, pick it up by the side, and flip it over. Rather than scream or back away, Oliver remains seated and caps his pen.

"I apparently am lacking in notoriety," I say. "I mean, you named a whiskey after Arthur Lindsay, but there's no Nero anything. Arthur is a legend, but he didn't save the world or else we'd still have the internet, cell phones, and an inflated economy. I'm the future, Oliver, and I will pin you down, force open your mouth with my dirty fingers, and pull your tongue with a pair of pliers until you start talking."

"You have a subtle approach to human interaction," Oliver says. "I don't name any of our products, though."

Before I can grab him by the collar, Oliver pulls me down to the floor by my wrist and tries twisting my arm around as his legs push against my ribs and he plants all of his weight on my chest. Admittedly, I'm surprised, because usually people fold like kindergarten origami fortune tellers when I try hurting them. However, he's not entirely aware that he will have to eventually get off of me, and I will still be alive when he's panting from using all of his strength.

But I don't want to wait that long, so I push my left ankle over and under me, push up, and Oliver tumbles over. Now, I have the chance to grab him by the collar, and I didn't want to hurt his pristine face. He's so damn pretty. But he's also an asshole who might be involved in human trafficking. A couple of knocks to his right cheekbone, and I expect him to beg me to stop. Instead, he relaxes his entire bodyweight while holding onto my arm so we fall together.

"We can do this until you're bruised and bloody, Oliver," I say, "But I'll walk out of here without a mark."

"I don't even know what you're asking for," He says.

"Frisco Mana went to his school directly from the teleportation terminal here. Not even a mile from this building."

"There're lots of buildings here."

"This was the first one I saw with people inside."

"Can you please get off me, Nero?"

I rise but don't offer to help him off the floor. I might have to pick up the desk and throw it at his head.

"I'm a dead end," Oliver says. "What you're looking for isn't here. Not with me, anyway."

"The police officer who was here when I showed up," I say, "Knew Luna. Your business is connected with the police in some way, because she was able to get a cop over here before I could even walk on your property."

"Who? Officer Redman? His patrol route is in this area. It's not like he has anything better to do."

"The Colt revolver that Frisco had on him was broken. I know because I planted it in the APD's evidence room eight months ago."

"Oh," Oliver says, "So because I know a police officer's name, and somehow the police are connected to this, then I'm automatically a sociopath?"

"No, you're a sociopath because it took me wrestling you like a reluctant prom date to get you to talk."

Given how easy it is to make Oliver laugh, I'm sure he's a lot of fun at funerals. The fact that I'm not cracking him only makes me want to try harder, though. I bet even if I had a gun pointed at his temple, he'd maintain his stone exterior.

"I bet there is something you care about, though," I say. "Actually, I have a funny story for you. Sit pretty for a sec. Oh, shit, your face. Sorry."

"I've taken a few punches before you came along."

"Where were you in 2127? You look younger than me. That car you're driving is a GM. I paid a visit to their plant in Texas back then. I was young and full of mostly piss and a redhead took most of my cum. But see I was angry and decided I was going to blow up that plant. Seems to be a recurring plan in the back of my mind, because I almost blew up the Atlanta Post Office once. You know what stopped me, though? Any guess?"

"Your conscience," Oliver says.

"Deus ex machina. An act of God himself. Birch showed up and stopped me. But now he's gone. That means I am deus ex machina, Oliver. I am the act of God that is going to stop you, and one thing we know about God is that He can really reign down hellfire. What do you think a little fire will do to your distillery?"

Oliver's eyes change their message. Now he's getting it. I'm willing to come in here and destroy his office with no provocation, so why wouldn't I burn down the whole place?

"There're security cameras at the terminal and at the entrance of this property. I can show you the footage."

Indeed, there's a monitor in the corner of the room. Oliver turns the clock on every feed back to 8:13 AM from yesterday. Frisco walked to the teleportation terminal from the opposite end of the road leading to New Brand Distillery. I might buy this setup if he actually passed the distillery instead of someone dropping him off far away.

I'm not going to hassle Oliver anymore today, though. If he's involved, he's aware I'm getting close, and that's enough for now. I now have a new target for my stalking hobby, though.

Luna sees me as I'm coming downstairs and shows the chipped nail on her middle finger. I was just going to leave. Now I'm detouring in her direction.

"You come by those gray hairs honestly?" I ask.

"I hope you're leaving here very disappointed," Luna says.

"How could any man walk away upset after he got a chance to meet you?"

She goes over to a group of men pouring some concoction in a glass receptacle. Maybe I need to find a new girlfriend when I figure all of this out? By then, I'll probably be fifty and well past my best years.

The chamomile and lavender tea doesn't help with nightmares. I always wake up when I feel and hear Detective Torrent's bones break. Keeping my attention on his case made me almost forget I killed him. What disappointed me most was that Oliver Lauria didn't have a basement full of kids. He's actually boring with his routines. He probably spends two hours at work each week, doesn't own a TV or Haptic Mask, reads from a library of old books, and occasionally brings a woman home to fuck. A good looking guy like that could have a wife and a gazillion kids. About once a month, he goes to another country like Italy or Spain for a vacation.

What's he biding his time for, I wonder? Maybe with me getting too close, Oliver figured he should cool down. After all, those kids are gone for years. But I'm probably trying to keep the chase going to forget what I've done. Why feel guilt for what I'm meant to do, though? If Kyair hadn't brought me up to believe killing is wrong, would I have ever felt this way?

Each clue or lead I find, I have to wait. Since I can't get back to sleep, I put on some pants and figure I'll take a drive. Sometimes riding around with my headlights off lets me see a different view of the city. But as I turn over the engine and idle out of my gate, I think back to Oliver. If he has good money from selling liquor, then surely he has other investments I haven't seen?

The city hall won't be open at two-in-the-morning, but I can always find a way in. Since computers can't connect via a network or even bluetooth, all of the digitized property records are on one server with a single PC connected. All of the property records are public information, but a citizen has to put in a request and wait for a print out to be mailed to them.

Or you can offer a bagful of cheeseburgers to the night security guard who lets you in the rear entrance. The server room is cold, so I'm folding my hands under my arms as I wait for the computer to load. Rather than sit around trying for find anything on Oliver or anyone who owns a substantial amount of property in the area, I clone the data on a SD card. The estimated wait time is thirty minutes.

Rossa and I used to play a game to pass the time called Teabag. She'd lay with her feet on the headboard and we'd take turns trying to hit each other in the forehead with a bag of herbal tea. Whoever scored five hits first had to make dinner. Neither of us were great cooks. I can boil water for noodles or rice, but I don't eat carbs much these days. So, if I want a home cooked meal, it's either hamburger patties on the stovetop or frozen chicken tenders.

She used to make a meatloaf that was essentially ground beef, some bread crumbs, and chopped onions. Sometimes she burnt it and I would eat half of it anyway. Right now, I'd swallow a whole pan of it if she were back with me.

When the transfer is complete, I thank the night man and head home. Whatever I find on here may lead to nothing. I just wish I'd thought of this sooner. My eyelids are telling me I won't be able to take a look until I sleep awhile. When I'm pulling back up my driveway, I feel like pulling off and sleeping right here.

After a couple of hours on the couch, my head is throbbing and all of me wants to stay there, but I feel dehydrated and slightly nauseated from the reminder of Detective Torrent in my dreams. Rather than using a glass, I dunk my head under the kitchen faucet and drink as much as I can swallow.

I'm left questioning why I'm back here. When I left Atlanta in 2137 and reconnected with Rossa, I figured I was finally going to accept that I can rest without worrying about other peoples' problems. Birch trying to kill himself and leaving me to die in the fallout makes me wonder what he was really doing. He can't die, but he's not here anymore. Surely, he's somewhere. Birch got me out of some shitty situations, and I'm stuck in a septic tank full of feces and children's corpses.

With all the data on the SD card, I can search any term or name to find something, but it's sort of like shining a light on a field of hay and seeing thousands of needles. I first check for my name, and after a moment of waiting, my address in Atlanta pops up. Eddie Knomen told me he owns property in town, so I can check his name next. However, only the firework's stand populates. Maybe Old American is in his wife's name? When I search for the liquor store, the property owner is listed as Knoedler Investment Group. The first three letters of Eddie's last name, K-N-O, might be in reference to Knoedler. Why wouldn't the firework's stand be listed under Knoedler too?

A few more results show up for Knoedler, including a mobile home park near Morrow. If Eddie had all this real estate, he probably would've bragged a little more. I was robbing him when he explained this before, so Eddie didn't exactly owe me the truth.

The phone number for Knoedler isn't an Atlanta area code either. It's too early to call and get anyone on the line at five AM. Since I went through all of this specifically to find out if Oliver owns any property in Georgia, I type in his name and expect to see something. However, there's nothing. His last name alone doesn't populate any results.

At least I can drive to Morrow and see if the trailer park has any current residents. Sometimes businesses from old America still exist in the database but only in name. Besides, New America doesn't have any modular home or trailer manufacturing plants. I've seen some that survived since 2033 and they were uninhabitable.

On the way, I stop at JJ's Diner figuring I might just need a carb load to get better rest later. Inside, there's one waitress, a cook, and a man drinking a glass of sweet tea at the end of the room, and I just know he might as well be chugging syrup. The best places always make their tea sweet enough that you could pour it on pancakes.

"What can I get you, sweetie?" The waitress asks.

"What sodas do you have?" I ask.

"We got root beer, apple, cherry, and chocolate."

"Apple," I say. "And can I get three pancakes, a plain omelet, and sausage?"

"Be about ten minutes."

The man at the other end of the room pays his bill and waves to me. Now that I'm alone, the silence in here makes every move I make sound louder than two men pounding each other out in an alleyway.

"You from Morrow?" I ask the waitress.

"Nah, I'm from Hapeville," She says. "My husband grew up in Morrow, though."

"Do you know of a trailer park out there near the old mall?"

"Shoot," She says. "You know, there is a place with some run down trailers and campers near Southlake, but don't nobody go over there."

"So, it's abandoned?"

"Oh, I'd bet my left titty there're some people living there. Some of them have just taken old siding from them warehouses, like the ones across the street from here, and basically reinforced the walls and roofs."

The sausage is a little spicy, and by the time I finish the pancakes, my stomach is telling me I need to evacuate the main hatch. When I sit down in the bathroom, everything feels like it comes out of me at once without any lube to help my asshole. I can feel my intestines slowly going back to their normal size.

After a big poop, I want to go back to sleep, and I rest my face against the Sarmenti's steering wheel for a hot minute. The worst part of getting older is mentally feeling like I'm still in my twenties and finding I have physical limitations. If I show up at this trailer park to find nothing special, I'm going to probably stop here again for another round in the bathroom.

The first red flag is that the park isn't clearly visible from the main road thanks to tall pine trees, but the second red flag is a freshly maintained gravel road. Whoever lives in there will hear me if I drive on the property. I have to leave my car parked in the grass and walk alongside the path so I don't alert anyone.

Through the trees, a Winnebago that's torn and broken through the middle sits closest to me. Like the waitress said, there are two structures made up of recycled siding once used for industrial warehouses as a means to help keep the elements out of old trailers. I bet they cook like ovens in the summer, though.

However, there is a log cabin off to the side that looks like someone built it in the last decade. A man sits on a railing smoking a hand rolled cigarette. His jean jacket is missing its sleeves, and he has ratty hair to match. When the front door opens, a girl about seven-years-old has her face down and he starts walking behind her as she goes to one of the old trailers.

That could just be his daughter or niece. Maybe he's a nice guy and a good role model. However, this isn't a Thomas Kinkade painting hanging on your grandma's wall. Something is off about this picture.

Behind the cabin, I'm not tall enough to see in the windows, and there're no milk crates or random ladders to hoist myself up on. I worry that my weight will break something if I grab onto the window sill and try to look inside.

There's only one door in and out of the place, so there's my third red flag. At this point, I don't need to worry about my cover and go right up to the front door to let myself inside. There's only one room inside with a king sized bed, an industrial sink in the corner, and a toilet. Clearly, no one lives in here, especially not the man pulling up his gray slacks and with an open blue dress shirt.

"Umm," He says, "Hello?"

"Hi," I say. "Paying your granddaughter a visit?"

"What?"

"The girl?" I gesture.

"I don't even know her name, buddy."

Covering his mouth so he doesn't scream too loud, I force the man to the wooden floor and make sure I push his nose fully into his face with my foot. The blood stains will likely take a few hours to clean up, and they'll have to dispose of his body somehow. Although, I don't think I'm

going to leave any of these men alive. Somehow, I feel vindicated in taking this man's life without question.

The girl went into the trailer directly across the gravel path, so I stroll over as the man in the denim jacket comes back outside. Glancing down at my shirt, I have a decent stain running down to my pants. I'm a little disappointed I'll have to throw this whole outfit away.

Then this guy pulls out a 9mm that looks identical to the police issued model Citadel Roberts had in his backpack. Rather than warning me, he goes ahead and lets out a few rounds until I grab the hot barrel and use my elbow to knock the dirty fucker in the chin.

"How many other men are here?" I ask.

"Did that fucker send you down here to do this?" He asks.

"Who?"

"Wait," He tries crawling backwards, "You're Nero."

"Yep," I jump on the guy's stomach and collapse my legs onto his chest. "How many?"

He's wheezing and I suppose I crushed something inside of him, so he won't be able to answer.

"Well, you're useless now," I hold his mouth shut and pinch his nose.

As this guy squirms beneath me, another man emerges from the trailer with a stunner, which he probably uses on that girl. Normally, I don't use guns, but I grab denim man's 9mm and fire a round into the bigger man's left ribcage. He's not going to die immediately from that shot, of course.

Aiming the gun at the bleeding, bearded hog unable to reach his cattle prod, I don't think he's going to answer any of my questions either.

"Anyone else I need to worry about?" I ask.

"Yeah, your mother's cunt," The man spits.

I hope Lilith reminds him that those are his carefully chosen last words. Maybe she'll roast his testicles in lava for what he's done to that girl.

Thankfully, the front door is open and I don't have to theatrically kick it open. Much like the cabin, there're no walls inside, but instead of a guy in his late fifties zipping his pants, there are about ten kids tied to posts with blindfolds on.

Looking back outside, I don't see anyone else around, but that second trailer might have an armed man for each kid in here. I know I shouldn't leave them in here, but there's no one inside who can hurt them. Before I reach the door of the other trailer, a woman comes out with her hands in the air.

"Mister," She gets on her knees, "I ain't got nothing on me."

Rather than believe her and assume I can walk around her to get inside, I aim for her head and let her fresh corpse topple over the stairs and onto the dirt. Kicking her over, I see the stun gun she would've used on me tucked into her pants.

Inside this trailer is empty other than a kitchen that looks like four prison chefs had a food fight inside of, and a couch I know I've seen on the *Brady Bunch*. Smells like an army bunk when everyone hasn't showered or cleaned their asshole in a week.

Should I call APD to help get these kids out of here, or will they merely alert the owner of this operation that it's bust? I sure as hell can't fit ten kids in my car. When I pull their blindfolds away, each of them looks about ten years older around the eyes than they should. None of them appear to fear me. Maybe I'm one of many in a line who have been through here and hurt them?

"Do any of you know where a phone is?" I ask.

"There's one outside," A boy says.

"All of you follow me. I'm calling for help."

Four APD cars and a van show up to the scene, and Commissioner Cullock follows shortly in a restored Ford Crown Victoria. As officers search the area, I help load the children into the van when Cullock comes to shake my hand.

"Doesn't matter who was wrong or right," He says, "Because these kids are going home today because of you."

"I'm going to follow this van down to the station," I say.

"And I'm not opposed to that. I'll let the boys know you'll be there."

It's after two PM when the last set of parents come to pick up their kid. Even though this is a victory, there are still plenty of missing children. I also haven't gotten a chance to reconcile Eddie's liquor store being connected to the trailer park. Cullock agreed to have officers investigate each of the Knoedler properties today excluding the New American liquor store, because I need to talk to Eddie as a courtesy.

The old man is sweeping the floor when I walk in. Without looking around at me, he lets out a loud sigh and puts his broom against the wall.

"Heard your car before you came in," He says. "I also got an interesting phone call this morning."

"What's your connection to Knoedler, Eddie?" I ask.

"Gosh," He finally faces me, "I wish it was a little more than it is. They own this building. It's also how I get most of my liquor."

"So, you're not involved directly with Knoedler?" I ask.

"As in, am I part of the company? No. Why are you asking me about that?"

"What was the phone call then?"

"Oh, my wife called about the news with you saving all those kids."

"Let me backtrack to what you just said, though. Knoedler is your liquor supplier?"

"They own New Brand," Eddie shrugs.

"Jesus," I say. "Then Oliver is involved."

"Nero?"

Running out the glass pane door, I book it to the teleportation terminal across the street and request to go to Chattanooga. An error message populates. Apparently, the Chattanooga terminal is down for maintenance or something. It'll take me an hour to drive up there, and if Oliver knows I'm coming, he could be in Italy by now.

Since there're no cars on I-75, I floor the pedal as I'm praying that Oliver has no idea what's about to happen. If Eddie heard about the trailer park without even watching TV, then I'm sure

everyone knows my name who didn't before. However, even if Oliver is at home and unaware, I don't see a scenario where this ends well.

Every time I see his house, I don't want to believe he lives there. For a guy who gives off disposable income vibes, Oliver lives in a one story ranch style home. Granted, the inside is renovated with two commonalities amongst the rich: a kitchen island and a nice bathroom with a huge shower. Not a square foot of carpet in the place either.

His car isn't in the garage, but I go around to the back door, bust through the small window within the frame, and unlock the deadbolt. While he might not be home, Oliver likely left some hint as to where he went.

The leather carry-on case he keeps in his closet is gone. It may be a waste of time, but I need to stop by the distillery to see if he's in the office. However, I go to the phone hanging on the kitchen wall to call the Chattanooga Teleportation server room.

"CTS," A woman answers, "How may I be of assistance?"

"Hi, I'm calling from the Atlanta station, and I was wondering what was going on with the terminal out there?"

"Oh, we fixed that issue, sir. Someone decided to spill something on the computer in the terminal."

"Could you tell me if anyone has used it today and where they went?"

"I'm actually not showing any activity today. It's not uncommon for us to go a few days without anyone coming or going."

"Thanks."

Oliver had security cameras in his office, but he may have hired someone to throw water into the circuits just as a diversion. He has a car, so he could be anywhere now. Probably drove to Nashville and teleported somewhere.

As long as New Brand is still making products, he still has a bankroll. It's possible he's there now preparing to leave. If anyone last saw him, I bet it was Luna.

I park the Sarmenti right in front of the stairway that leads into the distillery and Luna comes toward me as soon as I'm inside.

"He's not here," She says.

"I need to look at the security footage."

"It's gone," Luna says. "He was in here this morning and when I looked in his office, the monitor and hard drive were in pieces."

"Bullshit," I say.

"Come on, if you don't believe me."

Following Luna upstairs, I look around the ground floor and there're barely any workers around. Maybe the afternoon shifts are slimmer?

"Got a high turnover rate, Luna?" I ask.

"No," Luna says, "I sent most everybody home. I can't get Oliver on the phone, and he didn't speak to me today."

"Hear the news from Atlanta?"

"Yeah," Luna nods. "I reckon he did too."

As she stated, the camera monitor and the accompanying hard drive are demolished. Otherwise, the office is pristine as if no one ever came in here today. I'll probably never find Oliver, but I bet he's responsible for a whole lot more missing kids in this country.

"Do you know anything about his other properties?" I ask.

"I know that he buys and sells around here," Luna says, "But not often. Most of his money is invested in Georgia."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Because it pays to know who you're working for, Nero. I didn't know about the kids, but I knew about a lot of other stuff he had going on."

"If you had to bet where he went, what would you say?" I ask.

"Gosh," Luna puts her hands on her hips. "He used to go to a cabin in Georgia a lot. Right near the Carolinas. He never said exactly where, though."

"Do you think you could get the rest of these people out of here?" I ask.

"Yeah," Luna shrugs. "I'm about ready to go home anyway."

"I hope you have a contingency plan."

I stand at the doorway as everyone in the distillery gives Luna a nod and files out. None of them drive here, so they walk to the sidewalk and head home like children on a fieldtrip. Luna should follow them, but she's waiting for me with her arms crossed as she leans against the wall.

"You need to go home," I say.

"My husband died last year," She says. "I've spent more time here since then than in my own bed."

"Unless you want to die of smoke inhalation," I approach one of the huge vats, "I think it'd be good if you were anywhere but here."

"I'm going to wait outside then."

Leaning over a lake of clear, unaged alcohol, I flick my lighter and lean down to create a rushing blue flame. As the blaze starts flowing, I go to the wall of aging barrels and poke a hole in the side of the one on the bottom right so I can ignite the whiskey inside.

As I leave the room, the rear wall is fully engorged and heat is reaching the ceiling. Luna lingers outside as I move my car away from the stairwell, and lower my window to talk.

"You wanna come with me on a road trip?" I offer.

"I'd rather not give Oliver the chance to kill me," She says. "You can give me a ride home, if you don't mind."

What am I in for if I take this woman home? I have to go back to Atlanta to check out Oliver's other properties to see if there's one near the Carolina line.

"Can you drive?" I ask.

"It's been a while, but I have a license."

"Here," I throw her the keys. "I'm going to teleport back to Atlanta. I'll come back for the car later. Unless you want a job driving back to Atlanta for me."

"How you'd pay me?"

"Five hundred bucks."

"Shit, for five hundred bucks, I'll fucking marry you."

"Stay classy, Luna."

I'm catching my breath after running up my driveway and have to pause in the front yard. When I go to unlock the front door, I forget that I gave Luna the keys. I'll have to go in through the garage. Then I notice tire tracks in the grass to the left of the big metal door. Parked behind my house is Oliver's GM.

The front door is unlocked, so I let it swing open and wait a moment. Looking in the crack between the door and the frame, I don't see anyone waiting for me on the other side. Poking my head inside, there's no sign of him.

"Oliver?" I call inside.

Rude asshole doesn't respond just like when we first met. I kick the door shut behind me and slide against the wall to the security screen. He's not showing up on any of the cameras, but I can lock all the windows and doors so he can't get out without breaking glass.

"Remember how you pretended you didn't know what I was talking about before?"

He's not in the living room. From this vantage point, if he's in the kitchen, he'd have to hide behind my island. Oliver is smart and probably aware that while he can't break my skin, he can always use electricity to knock me out. There're no guns in the house, which I'm beginning to realize puts me at a slight disadvantage for intruders who may carry a stungun.

However, I do have a vintage hardback copy of *Ulysses*, which makes for a good blunt object to toss toward the counter at the far end of the kitchen. Rolling on the floor, Oliver points a tazer in the air and fires a line of electric string.

"Why didn't you just run away to Italy?" I ask.

Kicking the weapon from his hands, I pull a pan from the dish rack nearby and ram it into his forehead. Finally, I get a groan out of him. Patting him down, I find some mace in his back pocket, which I toss in the sink.

"Oh man," I say, "Because of you, I have killed, let's see... One, two, three, four, five people. I made it about forty years without ever resorting to murder. I gotta say: It's not as fun as hurting someone and making them live with the pain."

Dragging Oliver by the ankles, I walk backwards to the garage. He'll prosper in my cellar for a couple of days without food or water. Maybe Luna will drop by and she can watch what I do. At this point, I'd like to think I've nailed the art.

I leave Oliver's car in the parking garage across the street from the downtown teleportation terminal, so I'm able to go straight home afterward. Before I try to nap on the couch, I put a couple of chicken breasts in the oven with some broth, garlic, and butter. I'm dozing off as I'm eating with the channel five news on, but I manage to finish and lie down on my left side in case I have indigestion.

In what feels like a ten second nap, I wake up to an alert from my security system. It's dark outside, though, and I didn't have any dreams. There's no way Oliver got out from the cellar. I couldn't even get a sledgehammer through that door.

Luna is waiting in my car at the gate. It's too late for me to call the bank to have money transferred to her account, and I didn't expect her to show up so soon at night. Maybe she knew Oliver was here the whole time?

She's standing outside the car looking like a kid eager for Halloween candy. I could ask her to throw over the keys and hold her hands up, but she hasn't given me an actual reason to believe she's dangerous or out to get me. I tend to be more paranoid when I've only had a few hours of sleep in two days.

"Hey big fella," She offers me the keys through the gate.

"Thank you for coming down here," I say. "The good news is that you can teleport back home pretty easily."

"Actually, I've never been to Atlanta before," She says. "I was thinking of finding a hotel. I know the bank is closed, so I figure I'll come see you in the morning."

"Have you had dinner yet?" I ask.

"Yes, sir," Luna says. "I stopped at a wing place near downtown."

"I don't have a guest room," I say, "But I can put clean sheets on my bed and I can sleep on the couch."

"Oh," Luna steps back. "Sure. I can at least come in for a minute."

She knew I was going to look for Oliver and may not be in tonight. I'm also not sure how she found my house. Maybe she just asked someone in town. It's not a big secret. Still, I put a hand on her shoulder and look at her close to spot any anxiety. Her smile is something I haven't seen before, but I glimpse at what she probably looked like twenty years ago.

"Got any weapons on you?" I ask.

"You're welcome to check."

"Let me move my car to the garage," I say. "Let yourself inside."

I'm surprised Oliver isn't screaming for someone to help him. The cellar isn't soundproof, so Luna could hear him if she was in the kitchen. Maybe he's trying to prove a point? I'm curious how lenient she'll want to be in the event he does start screaming.

"Can I get you something to drink?" I ask as I come inside.

"Oh, you have something other than water?" Luna asks.

"Sure," I say. "I keep a little apple soda in the fridge. I could make you a cup of tea."

"You don't have anything stronger?"

Since Luna passes out on the couch from half a jar of whiskey, I go sleep in my bed for the night. To my surprise, I don't wake up with her and Oliver standing over me. Instead, when I go check the living room, she's gone. From the security footage, I see she left early and went straight down my driveway.

I was kind of expecting more. It's not that I find Luna irresistibly breathtaking, but I haven't had sex since I lost Rossa. At almost five years of abstinence, I am about ready to lube up a tree and go to town.

But I have to consider my lifestyle. I can't fool around with relationships when I'm a target. Oliver could've kidnapped my girlfriend and held her captive.

I order a pizza since I can't leave the property with a man locked in my garage, and after my workout routine, I put the music video station on and stare at the ceiling while my muscles heal. There was a shop that sold CDs and refurbished players, but it closed pretty quickly because no one can afford that shit. The idea of owning music or even listening to the radio is so novel.

As soon as I wake up, I go to the cellar to check on Oliver, who is doubled over and staring into nothing. He'll be too weak to fight against me, and I only have to tug on his wrist to get him over to the work bench where I've cleared a place for him to lie down. With leather straps, I secure him down, and stuff his mouth with a sock.

"God, you've got such a pretty face," I say. "Imagine what life will be like in prison looking like that. I have to do you a solid and fuck you up a little, man. Otherwise, your poor asshole won't be able to hold anything in."

He stares at the ceiling, and I'm a little disappointed he isn't pleading. There's no life behind his eyes as if he's missing a soul.

"You could tell me where the other kids are," I say. "I know there are more."

Rather than trying to speak through the sock, Oliver remains silent.

"Alright," I say. "Let me help you with that face."

First, I try sandpaper on his cheek. Of course, only tiny cuts form, and dead white skin flakes off. His forehead doesn't tear as easily, though. I use the sharp end of my hammer to scrape a little, but Oliver remains mute.

"You're torturing me," I say.

I have a blunt nail that makes his leg jerk when I rub the end against the bottom of his foot. Since this seems to be the best place to get him, I grab the hammer and aim for his little toes, but don't swing too hard. He gets the idea.

"Anyway," I toss the hammer at his chest. "I'm getting bored."

Should I kill him or cut off his face? One can lead into the other, I suppose. At this point, I should ask myself why I am doing this at all. Do I achieve a satisfaction from torturing people regardless of their morality? Surely that makes me as bad as Oliver even if my victims aren't innocent children. However, his actions led to potentially hundreds of children suffering. If Oliver is gone, does that stop his entire operation? The whole point of this was not only to stop the kidnapping, but also the school shootings.

"Oliver," I pull the sock from his mouth, "I'm sorry. I'm going to put you back in the cellar and bring you something to eat, okay? Is there anything in particular you'd like? I can get you anything."

"Water would be nice," Oliver says. "I'd like a shower."

"What about food?" I ask.

"Anything you have works. I don't have any allergies or preferences."

"Okay," I nod.

Grabbing the electric drill from my toolbox, I put in a stainless steel drill bit intended for cement and test the battery by pulling the trigger twice.

"Just as soon as I finish this," I say.

I thought about putting this directly into his stomach, but instead go for his right thigh. Finally, Oliver screams and his eyes show me life.

"So, think you could start telling me where the other kids are?" I ask.

"They're fucking dead, asshole," Oliver says.

"Such language," I say. "I'm not sure I believe you."

Hitting the drill's trigger again, I let the end swirl around inside as Oliver's body pulsates. I don't think I'm actually doing anything wrong here. This man was responsible for children's abductions and deaths. He doesn't deserve any sort of reform or redemption, yet I don't want to kill him. He's not presenting me with any danger right now, so I don't feel justified in ending his life.

"We killed them once they started showing signs..." Oliver says. "When they started changing."

"Okay," I say. "Where are the bodies?"

"The trailer park," Oliver says. "They're buried underneath the old trailers."

"Gimmie a moment," I run to the kitchen.

In the drawer with my extra spatulas and big spoons is a mini-blowtorch. Sometimes I need a little finishing touch on chicken. I don't make any crème brulees. However, when the blue flame appears in Oliver's line of sight, he closes his eyes and grits his teeth. The wound in his leg cauterizes well, though.

"You've been so much trouble," I say. "I think if you actually get arrested, there's a chance you won't be convicted. You have connections, right?"

"The man you killed in that cabin was a DA," Oliver says. "It's not that I have connections. All I did was accept their money, and I've got a lot of it."

As much as parents deserve closure, I doubt the APD is going to dig up any bodies in that trailer park. There are too many implications. Putting Oliver in jail might result in him getting killed just to keep him quiet, though. I know the commissioner wants him alive after all of this.

"How much?" I ask.

"You want to know how much money I have?" Oliver asks. "Nero, if I could've bought you off, I wouldn't tried that two years ago."

"Someone is going to get their hands on it all," I say. "Probably cops."

"Just kill me then," Oliver says.

"I'll cut off your balls and fuse your eyelids shut before I do that."

"I only have a little under a million," Oliver says. "Half of that is from booze."

"You trafficked children, and you're not even a millionaire?"

"Not all of us received land in Birch's will, Nero."

I suppose that kind of news gets around. He's known who I am long before we met, then. Birch was always a name in New America akin to God and the boogey-man. He was worse than what hid under your bed. For a little moment in Atlanta, I was almost like that.

"And poor Rossa," Oliver says. "You being the last of the Trinity makes such little sense. You're the worst of them."

"What do you know about the Trinity?" I ask.

"The Lauria family used to be nothing. Before old America broke down, we'd already lost everything. What little money my family had was invested in the internet and television stock because my great-great-great ad nauseam grandfather worked for a company called Central Network. If history is correct, then two men in the Trinity were directly responsible for destroying everything my family had. I can't say I'm broken up about it now, though. I did name one of our whiskeys after them."

"Nice story," I say. "So you're obsessed with the Trinity."

"Oh, I know all about it. I even know where Birch went."

"He's gone," I say. "He's not coming back."

"But he is coming back. He's just lost."

Forcing Oliver's nostrils together, I shove the handle of the hammer into his mouth. Whatever he is saying is bullshit. I'm wrong here, though. While shutting him up might feel good, I need to make an example out of him.

"Think about what you're about to say next," I pull the tool from his teeth.

"You'd be doing me a favor," Oliver says, "Since I don't want to live to see what happens to this world when he comes back."

"I think you're delirious from not eating," I say.

Releasing him from the straps, I pull Oliver off the table and walk him back to the cellar. I grab a can of soup and pour it into a small pot on the stove before noticing the blood on my hands and clothes. At what point do I become the monster instead of the hero? Oliver hurt children and traded them as if they were toys.

After tossing in an empty bucket, I sit the bowl of soup on the floor next to a mason jar of water. I sit down at the door to watch him in case he decides to break anything.

"You can use the bucket as your toilet," I say.

"Luxurious," Oliver says.

"Is there anything else I should know before I take you to the police station?" I ask.

"Oh," Oliver smirks to himself. "The gun... That Colt that you found on Frisco. The guy at the liquor store gave it to you, right?"

"Eddie," I say. "How'd you know that?"

"He called me after you planted it," Oliver says. "Did you know he used to be a police officer?"

"Finish your soup," I say.

When we arrive at the APD, I kick Oliver out of the car and he's trying to push himself off the ground by the time I grab him by the underarm and hoist him up. Two officers hurry over to take him into custody, and I let them handle the bastard as they take him inside.

It's true he might be let go soon. If the APD has any tact, they'll keep him in a cell until he's tried. I'll have to deliver the justice in the event he's found not guilty, but I have to let the court decide first.

Commissioner Cullock comes outside waving his hands before I start to drive away. He bends down to the driver's side window and holds up his thumb.

"Thank you," He says. "I don't know what you went through to find him, but thank you. I promise I'm not going to let him get off for this."

"See you next crisis, Cullock," I say.

After the years I put into this investigation, I don't want another one for a while. I know that Oliver was probably blabbering about Birch to fuck with me, but I am curious. Birch was the figurehead and had essentially claimed that title by taking out Lucifer on Earth twice, and he lived

through three generations of the Trinity. If he's gone, could Lilith have been right about a new generation? I don't feel like I'm a suitable figurehead, so one will likely kill me.

I do have a loose end in all of this. Eddie locks up the front door of the liquor store, which means he'll be leaving out the back soon. I'm leaning against the left-hand wall of the building when I look around to see if he's coming out, and there's Oliver's GM, and Eddie has the keys. How would he have found it, and why does he have it? I didn't leave the keys inside.

"Got the Colt on you?" I ask.

Eddie doesn't act surprised. He doesn't flinch. Instead, he puts the keys in his pocket and makes a motion with my mouth as if licking something stuck in his cheek.

"Or any other weapon?" I ask.

"This is quite a plot hole for you, Nero," Eddie says.

"How you figure that, Eddie?"

"Because nobody knows how I'm involved in this. All the signs already point back to Oliver."

"Oliver is in jail right now," I say. "He might just fill everyone in on your involvement. He did tell me you told him about the gun I put in the evidence room."

"What he didn't tell you is that he'll probably be shot in the head or killed in some accident this evening," Eddie says. "I've already made sure of it."

"And I'm sure that you're full of shit," I say.

"You might wanna go check, Nero. See, if you try to abduct me... Take me to your house, torture me, whatever you did to him... You're not going to be able to stop them from killing Oliver."

"Well, Eddie," I walk closer, "What you don't know is that I don't care whether he lives or dies. He's not my responsibility anymore. But you know what I'm beginning to realize is that some people deserve to live so they can face the consequences. I don't care if you think I need to make some connection between you and Oliver, and all of this shit with the kids. I just don't. Sometimes people are in the way. Listening to you act like you're playing mind games with me doesn't give you an extra life. You've only got one, and it's over."

Eddie's head hits the cement wall when I toss him against the building. Rather than beat him to death, I put him face down on the concrete and slam my foot against his spine. I stomp him until he's not breathing anymore. Now, I could pull him inside, start a fire, and let his body burn. However, I think the best example I can leave for this city is to let him stay in the open for someone to find him. Truthfully, I don't know if Eddie hurt anyone in his life. Killing someone based on implications doesn't make for a good policy. That's not why I did it.

I'm tired of people thinking they're going to outsmart a brute force. If there's a warehouse full of children, a woman locked in chains in a basement, someone's grandfather getting the shit kicked out of him for missing a loan payment, I'm going to break into any window, door, or wall I need to and stop the person who inflicts misery on the innocent.

Ken Price: 2015

I didn't give much thought to what happens to me after death. Because I was never going to Hell no matter what I did, I never dwelt on my soul's perpetual rest. The conceit of Heaven is that you fear God and an unfortunate demise. Christians seem to think Hell is eternal, so one bad fuck up and you're burning with no redemption. There's a truth to the Trinity that every new selection has to face: We're going to die at the hands of someone else.

Normal people die of diseases. They have heart attacks and cancer. Those who God selects for the Trinity don't even know the common cold. Matthew unknowingly wrote the Trinity's creed. We're all meant to live by the sword. Thus, we die as we live. One day, someone will murder me. Perhaps it's already been decided who that will be. Does God or some sort of fate make that decision?

Everyone born into this already has their fate decided for them in some way. When I first learned of my future, as indeterminate as it felt, resentment overtook my persona. I wanted to kill my father. Destroy the empire he helped build. Face down both God and Satan as neither provided me with a path I could trek. Someone tells you that the entire reason you exist is to help bring an end to humanity, and your reaction is supposed to be thankful?

The last two people I saw before my death were Birch and Murray Groaan. As I recall, Murray tied me to a chair, Birch cut my tongue open, kicked me head first into the floor, and shot me in the face. However, it's not their voices I'm hearing.

Death prevents us from feeling pain, dwelling on our sorrow, and experiencing what we once knew. I never got to consider that a man I once trusted like a father practically held me still while a little shit of a boy silenced me. While I did try killing Walter Groaan and plotted the same fate for Murray, I can't ward off the realization that everyone I ever cared for betrayed me.

The woman I loved, Lilith, manipulated me into helping Lucifer. My father, Charles, faked his death and flipped the Armageddon switch. I could take solace in Birch having killed him too, but that was yet another right taken from me. I deserved to kill my father. Most of my animosity managed to dwindle when I thought he was dead and Lilith was polluting my mind.

My time of contemplation in the mental Fortress of Solitude concludes when the voices get closer followed by a bark. I open my eyes expecting to be back in Walter Groaan's living room, and there's a Boston Terrier pacing around me on a carpeted floor with furniture even Roseanne and Dan Conner wouldn't allow in their home. If all of the dander magnets and dog weren't enough, the lower ceiling and CRT TV from 1995 would give me some indication I'm in the wrong house.

The man and woman looking at me hold onto one another as if I'm an intruder ready to tie them upside down and torture their wrinkled skin with a thousand tiny razor cuts. Now, many of Atlanta's broken windows and busted doorknobs had my boot prints on them, but I never hurt strangers in a ranch style home built in the 1960's who didn't at least have some kind of hidden bankroll with Satan.

"Good morning," I say. "Sorry. I had a few too many. I'll see myself out."

The front door is thankfully not on a separate end of the house. Walter had a foyer, small hallway, and a lot of furniture in between the spot I died and outside world.

"How did you get into our house?" The woman asks.

"You know, I'm dying to find out myself," I say.

As the steps crunch under my feet, I look down at my clothes in the sunlight and there're no stains or signs that I died. A moment and a half ago, I was face down on a hardwood floor, and now I'm in a random neighborhood as if I ended up here after a bender. But there's something off.

As far as I know, it's still 2015, and I'm just outside of Atlanta, yet nothing looks familiar. I still have my wallet, keys to a car that isn't here, and an iPhone that won't turn on. If my phone doesn't work, I bet my future non-existent children my debit and credit cards don't either. There's forty bucks in cash in my wallet, though.

With no transportation or an Uber app, I am either going to need to walk to a Marta bus stop or steal a car. Stopping at a crossroads where a Lincoln Towncar is idling behind a minivan, I figure a somewhat stylish 1990's luxury vehicle is the lesser of two evils. The old man tapping his thumb along to "Fun, Fun, Fun" has his window rolled down, so I don't have to see if the door is unlocked before grabbing him by the ear, slipping my fingers under his jaw, and throwing him to the pavement. Have I ever done this before?

Maybe in my short time at Jefferson Tate I drove someone's car into a parking garage after killing them. Wasn't there some dealer named Stick or Branch? Odd foreshadowing to the man who ended up killing me, I suppose. My foot is a little heavy on the accelerator and I almost run a stop sign. The woman in a PT Cruiser takes her turn before I start pulling forward.

But there's this little bitch in an Escalade who almost slams into my right side. I have to hit my brake and they try pulling around me, and I gotta say that I'm just in no mood for this shit right now. Their poor chrome grill dents when I ram the Lincoln into them. The driver has to counter with their own accelerator to prevent from going backwards before reversing and pulling around to get away from me, but they turn to the right instead of where they were headed.

This opportunity reminds me that I can escalate this to the point someone gets seriously hurt. I have an objective to find out where the hell I am and how to mitigate my seemingly second chance. Perhaps this is all a test from God. I'm in purgatory or a simulation. However, I'm in the Trinity and can do whatever the fuck I want.

Depending on how old these tires are, I might rip a hole in them the way they squeak against the asphalt as I'm banking on knocking off the Escalade's bumper when we collide. Even with me rear ending them, I bet they know better than to get out. Luckily, they don't slam on their brake and try getting away.

A power pole serves as an adequate speedbump, and that's when the little balding man with his Mormon Missionary costume tries running away. He thinks I got caught up in the moment and won't follow him onto the sidewalk because that means I'm a murderer. Hell, he might be able to come back to the crash site in a few minutes to have a calm conversation with me.

He lets out a surprised whimper when the Lincoln actually pulls onto the sidewalk only a few yards away, and his adrenaline no doubt gives him the boost to hop a chain link fence in front of a house, but those don't offer much protection from a speeding car.

A woman looks at this scene from her screen door, and she likely doesn't have insurance to cover the property damage. She'll also have to disclose that a murder took place in the front lawn.

The man is already pleading with her to let him inside to which she responds with a slamming door. At least she'll call 911.

"Whoh, buddy," The guy turns around with his hands up.

My right fist hits his cheekbone and he lands on his ass on broken bricks. With my left foot, I kick him in the throat before switching to my right for his stomach.

"I bet you pull that shit all the time," I say. "In your expensive SUV with your middle management clothes thinking at least you're not the poor shit that has to drive a 1994 Lincoln."

"Mister," He holds up his hands again.

"You wanna live?" I ask. "You want to learn something from all of this?"

"What do you want?" He's already reaching in his pocket.

"Cash," I say.

"I only have my cards," He says.

"Well, that's just bad judgement."

Another couple of punches to his nose, and he stops moving. If he survives this, I hope he never drives again. As I'm headed back to my stolen car, all the gawkers are moving again. At least one of them probably made a video on their phone.

Of course, my outburst made any attempt I made at being inconspicuous null. Prior to this moment, my public displays of violence were limited to bombing server rooms and crashing various flying contraptions into buildings. Freudlind really made a domestic terrorist out of me. All in the name of taking down what I thought was Lucifer's corporate empire when I was really helping him build a new one.

I could drive to a bad neighborhood, start a few fights, eventually find someone with a gun, steal their weapon and wallet, and head out of town. I might as well skip all of that and try to get out of this city without ending up in a police shoot out where I have to kill a bunch of cops.

Rather than pulling onto I-20, I park in an empty lot across from a Waffle House and make my way over. My second chance isn't mixing well with driving when all of my thoughts need to work something out.

The jukebox is playing "Misunderstanding" by Genesis, which is the most welcome and apropos song. Alongside Steely Dan, my dad loved Phil Collins. When this song came on as a kid, I thought it was a strange sounding ditty about nothing. Then I grew up a little and found I really like the "Sail on Sailor" drum part highlighting the stalker lyrics.

A waitress doesn't come take my order before the grill stops sizzling and the place is empty as if everyone blipped out in the second coming. Hash browns burning and bacon cooking is replaced by a specific smoky scent. Lucifer sits across from me as if we arranged a meeting beforehand, which is when I realize this Waffle House probably doesn't even exist.

"You better get out of town soon," Lucifer pulls my menu away. "I think an old friend of yours is headed to town."

"What's all of this?" I ask. "I know I'm not in Hell."

"No, but you are on the wrong Earth. I can only surmise you ended up here when the man who calls himself Birch entered this timeline."

"What do you know about Birch?" I ask. "He killed me less than an hour ago."

"For someone who thinks he possesses such intelligence, you certainly lack a sense of time and place. You've been dead for over one hundred years, Mr. Price. My counterpart, the one you know as Lucifer, died not long after you. As much as I adore the company of violent psychopaths, I do not believe you belong here. Whatever you and Mr. Birch call yourselves."

"The Trinity," I say. "Surely you know all of this."

"You hardly resemble the Holy Spirit. This world doesn't know your kind, so I think you should return to a time that resembles what you once knew."

"Oh, go back to when Birch was able to kill me?" I ask. "No thanks. I would rather start fresh here. Or somewhere where he isn't."

"Go to wherever the Trinity exists, Mr. Price," Lucifer says. "In fact, I suggest doing just as I am sure Birch will. Return to your timeline prior to your father selling his soul so you can stop my counterpart's plot against humanity."

"No," I say. "I'm not about to go to the eighties and fuck my mother."

"Whenever you want then. Just leave this world."

"Fine. Care to explain how, tri-dick?"

"Once you enter my realm, you may enter the Hell of any timeline or dimension. I was unaware other timelines truly existed until Birch broke through."

"Why am I here?" I ask. "I died. Shouldn't I be in Heaven?"

"I cannot explain God, Ken. I merely thread along His laws."

"What happens after I die then? What about Lilith, Birch, and Arthur Lindsay?"

"I am uncertain as those events have yet to transpire. Are you suggesting I send you back to 2015 after your death?"

"Is there a way I could return without Birch killing me again?"

Each generation of the Trinity has what some call a figurehead, but the true figurehead has yet to appear. Whoever truly vanquishes Evil from Earth is the figurehead, and that will probably never happen. Although, this Lucifer claims my own Lucifer dies. That means either Arthur or Birch kill him. If I go back to 2015, I can take out Satan before either of them and claim the title.

"I cannot condone my own demise," Lucifer says. "Whatever you do in your own time does not concern me, though. Are you ready to return?"

"Yeah," I say. "The very moment Birch took me out so I don't lose my place in the Trinity, if you don't mind."

The first thing I notice about Hell is how the odor is unlike anything I experienced on Earth, yet I know this must be melting stone mixed with a soupcon of burning flesh. Little flames interrupt total darkness before I'm standing on a platform surrounded by a lake of fire. Steam rises as if creating a barrier and closes around me. Then the black returns before I'm seemingly standing in the exact same place with Lucifer looking at me.

"Price," He tilts his head.

Interrupting his own curiosity, Lucifer quits leaning in to see me as he almost jumps backward. Having a live part of the Trinity in Hell likely doesn't bode well for him.

"You are not Ken Price," He says. "His soul remains on Earth, though perhaps not for much longer."

"I didn't realize how much pleasure I'd take in this," I say. "You ruined my life before I was even born."

Pushing Lucifer back, I try knocking him down by hooking a foot behind his ankle, but he manages to maintain balance, so I charge him at the waist in a sweep as my knee falls under me and we're on the ground together. He tries pushing me off before I press all of my weight into his stomach and begin trying to break through his ribcage. I didn't think about bringing a knife or gun.

"What insipid children's game are we playing?" Lucifer asks.

"I'm on a scavenger hunt," I say. "Once I collect your heart, I'm going to toss it like a Frisbee into Hell's flames."

His grip significantly weakens when I hold Lucifer's heart in my hands, and I squeeze to see his face grimace. I'm not the type to take pleasure in killing. All death should be quick, and I might feel a little less animosity if mine wasn't drawn out with an insulting gesture rather than a simple shot to the head.

As Lucifer's body vanishes beneath me, I feel the Satanic power in a tidal sensation almost like an unexpected orgasm as every muscle, vein, blood vessel, and cell reforms as if God's gift to be invincible wasn't close to perfection. Information pours through my psyche as I'm learning so much at once, and I have to realign my focus so I don't miss my opportunity to return to Earth at the exact moment Birch pulls the trigger.

Exiting Hell reminds me of those long tunnels on I-20 as you enter downtown Atlanta. When my class went on fieldtrips, half of us screamed on the bus before the light returned. Instead of old leather, sweat, and feet, I smell grass, and I'm looking at my own corpse from outside a window.

Suddenly possessing the Satanic power gives me an opportunity to slow time and consider my options. I could destroy the entire house, which would kill Birch, Murray, and baby Alan. That denies me a lot of satisfaction, though. Instead, I opt to temporarily paralyze Murray, which causes him to fall over where my corpse sat. Walking through the glass without even a crack, I face Birch and hold up my thumb and index finger in the shape of a gun.

"Pow," I wink at him as my fake gun goes off.

The pistol in his hand dissolves. When we first saw one another in Philly, I experienced a fear previously unknown to me. I bled for the first time and ran. The more I consider why I was there, the less I can hold a grudge against Birch. He's a lonely, sad boy and I killed the first love of his life, and for nothing. Veronica was my cousin and the epitome of victimhood, especially with her spawn sitting in the other room.

"I didn't know your real name was Kay," I say. "Seems a lot less imposing than Birch."

"I just killed you," Birch backs away.

"And I was thinking I should kill you," I pull the chair from the floor and sit down. "But now when I consider what I did to you... I think I can remedy this situation."

Veronica technically has a soul because she's half-human, but that automatically damned her to Hell. This line of rationale makes me feel as if I'm playing a role in a bad CW vampire series. Her placement provides me with an advantage since I can't resurrect souls that ascend to Heaven.

"You want her back, Birch?" I ask. "This very out of character for me. You cut my tongue, denied me a final monologue, and shot me like a diseased dog. I'd admire your form if you let me bleed to death while tied up in that chair, but you just wanted to make sure I couldn't say another word. That was a very uncouth gesture, my boy."

"I'd say we're even," Birch says, "But I still lost someone."

"Let's make a deal, Mr. Abercrombie," I say. "I'll let you live if you take that bastard in the other room, little Alan, and raise him as your son with Veronica. When you return to your apartment, she'll be waiting for you, but only if you take the boy and leave."

Birch looks down at Murray, back at me, and leaves the room. As I wait to hear if he gets the baby, I turn my attention to my old mentor. Such a tragic case, and I can't wait to tell him all about Lucifer's plot. This must be what people call euphoria. We're hurt by our own ignorance, but knowledge is dangerous. Now, I know everything and get to adjust the pawns and knights accordingly.

"Oh me," I can't help laughing. "Murray, my friend. You are always the butt of the universe's joke. Let me help you up."

Snapping my fingers, we sit across from one another at the kitchen island where my father and Walter shared many drinks. Pouring myself a cold vodka, Birch passes through with the baby in his arms and a sack. Once he's out the front door, I take a sip.

"As eloquent as I am," I say, "I am about to be very blunt with you, Murray. Having tied me up and allowed someone to kill me... That makes you even more culpable for my death than Birch. Ugh. It's not fair to end your life so soon. Unfortunately, you're the greater of two Evils between yourself and Freudlind. Which gives me the pleasure of telling you that, uhh, you're both Antichrists. You, Harley, and Alan were going to bring down humanity together only to be foiled like villains in a superhero movie by the Trinity. It was originally supposed to be you and only you, but Lucifer saw Veronica as the ace in the hole. The backup plan to the backup plan. I mean, you knew all along that I was the original backup plan. Well, now it's all crumbs at the bottom of the dumpster, friend."

Murray's reddened eyes look at me as if I haven't told him a single thing he didn't already know, but that's his farce. He doesn't want to show how much it hurts that his life was always a one-way-road to Hell. Now, he's losing his grandson, and that cozy corner of Hell he was promised may not be so welcoming when I send him down there.

"I'm not at all surprised, kid," Murray says. "You wouldn't do or say anything if it didn't benefit your interests. That's why you let Alan go. You're hoping to follow through on Satan's plan just so you can be the hero who takes him down. Then you'll kill Birch and Arthur, and live out your days slowly going crazy... Well, crazier from all that power going to your head. What you've done by becoming the figurehead is cursed yourself. You get to live forever until God decided to end the world himself."

"Then I better make sure it's a world I want to live in."

How many times does Murray need to die, though? Considering his moral compass isn't necessarily pointed south and he possesses a lot of power and wisdom, he'd actually make a tremendous ally. Since I possess the Satanic power and there's no one filling the role, I'd rather have

him down there running things than meddling with Alan. I doubt he'll be a good Satan, but I don't need someone who's good at playing Evil incarnate.

"There's an empty seat in the underworld," I say. "We both know someone has to be Satan and balance Evil. What do you say, Huckleberry? You want a chance to realize your full potential?"

When was the last time I saw even a vague smirk on Murray's face? I'm growing uncomfortable with my generosity today. Birch hasn't gotten too far. I could force him to strangle Alan to death and not make good on my end of the deal. Bringing some random lady back to life doesn't sound like me either.

I never developed a taste for hurting people, and certainly didn't seek out victims to add to my seemingly never ending list. My initial interest in returning here was vengeance for my death, but I'm alive with a lot more power than before.

"Before you go," I grab Murray's wrist, "We need to have a very important lunch meeting."

Harley Freudlind's security detail can't account for his sudden disappearance, and certainly can't keep me from turning him into a rusty paperclip if I so choose. He should recognize the dining room since he was here not that long ago shoving his prick into Walter Groaan's corpse. Having instantaneously spent over a century dead, I forgot how plain and unattractive his square head is.

"Now, Freudlind," I say from across the table, "I've called you in here to discuss something, but don't be afraid to eat as we talk."

"Ken," Harley looks around the room. "I sense you're learning new tricks. You could've scheduled something with my secretary. I have email, you know? And why is the pitchfork sucker here?"

"Murray is your new master. Well, he's being promoted from VP to chief executive officer, but the good news is we're keeping you in your position."

"God is my only master, so..."

"Oh, shut the fuck up, Harley," Murray says.

"Keep up with the God talk and I'll demote you," I say. "And no more sick days this year."

The office shtick ran its course about five seconds before he showed up, so I implant the reality of the situation in Freudlind's mind. Surprisingly, I'm growing weary of explaining things today.

"Well, then, I respectfully resign," Freudlind says.

"Goddamn it," I say. "I want you to keep running Fonda, and instead of destroying anymore of Central Network's private property, we're going to buy them out and expand our consumer base a little faster."

"It's like Charles is in the room," Murray says.

"We can't purchase Central Network without violating antitrust law," Freudlind says.

"Stop talking. I'm sending you back to your office, and you're going to get a notification, probably an email since you're so keen on them, that you're going to be the new CEO of the rebranded Fonda Network."

All I want is the appearance of being a business man. I have no intention of actually working. Aside from installing fail-safes to prevent the internet satellites from falling in 2033, my

input in Fonda might consist of occasionally appearing in a meeting or fingering a secretary on a desk.

And now that poking orifices is on my mind, I need to find Lilith and my father, though I'm not certain which I want to murder versus keeping one of them in my basement. Considering my situation with Lilith was a fireworks display for my inner fat ADHD kid, I can't resume our living arrangement. Since she's likely ruined me for other women, I'll have to craft a damn good Fleshlight and some positive affirmation CDs. I do need to get Aroma Thorn an abortion, so maybe I'll just get to know her?

Once Freudlind's back in his office, I drain my remaining vodka in hopes that Murray will just go away.

"So, how do we make this official?" I ask.

"I'm not sure what we're talking about anymore," Murray says.

There's a comical quality to saying the Lord's Prayer backwards, and after all of this diplomacy I experience a mild urge to take a nap. Prior to my death, I was kind of homeless considering I was a prison escapee and hiding from my cousin's boyfriend. While motels in shithole towns have their charm and bedbugs can't penetrate my skin, I can't settle for a bed that's not mine anymore.

Atlanta's array of new construction with many new apartment buildings going up faster than the cardboard houses in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, and for rent that's more costly than people's mortgage payments, makes me wonder if a large tornado hit Buckhead, Midtown, and Downtown if all the housing would be held together by old Fortune Cookie messages and chew marked number-two pencils. I'd love to live in a one-bedroom high rise with real wood flooring, bright white walls with surrealistic artwork, a mix of ambient and natural lighting, stainless steel kitchen appliances I rarely use, a walk in closet, separate bathtub and shower, and no unnecessary stairs or hidden storage. Just a minimalist bachelor pad. Unfortunately, developers abandoned good taste in favor of what appears new to a niche group. The rent isn't high in many of these places because they possess such great amenities with a lovely view of the interstate, the Marta line, or other thrown together apartment buildings. It's all about selling people the idea that they have more money than the poor people who walk past their tall buildings every day.

The homes built in the 1980's and 1990's are out with this crowd. They don't want the gaudy wallpaper, kitchen islands with their own sink, Olive Garden decor, and leather sofas. That building that Birch and Arthur Lindsay were going to destroy, Central Network HQ, is about to be vacant from all its cubicle walls, Cisco phone system, broadcast studio, and executive offices. Without even snapping my fingers, I can turn it into my ideal apartment. Then I have to erase everyone's memories or brainwash them into believing this took months rather than two seconds, but I need my own place now.

Then there's an issue with my legal status since everyone saw my trial on TV, I put a giant hole in a prison, and faked my death in a helicopter crash. Issei Sagawa got away with cannibalism and became a Japanese celebrity, but being known as a domestic terrorist doesn't bode well for me. As such, I need to revitalize my public persona, which means I'm going to force some people to lie about the rationale behind my arrest and frame someone else for my crimes. Luckily, Arthur Lindsay

is a viable candidate. I should probably deal with him, Aroma Thorn, and the Atlanta Police Department first.

Unfortunately, some people will have to die. For instance, every single officer who saw me in prison, including the warden, is going to come down with a super flu. All I have to do is recall all of their faces and envision the virus making contact with their lungs.

Then there are all the officers who accompanied Aroma when Arthur aided in my arrest. I can't kill all of the police force, and I certainly can't remember their faces or names. I doubt even Aroma can. However, they all saw Arthur mow me down with a shotgun and flee the scene of a crime, so it stands to reason I might be framed.

Aroma's superior, Officer Conrad Hughes, didn't believe she had a case with me to begin with, but he backed her once I was in custody. Thankfully, I waived my right to a jury and I won't have to wipe them out. Hughes's role in my case presents me with an opportunity.

Beyond the collapsing jungle known as Vine City and prostitutes lining Fulton Industrial sits a new housing development where Conrad Hughes and his wife, Jennifer, recently moved in. Gentrification hasn't broken through the area, so it's a typical suburban development with cheap construction and houses lined in rows with little property separating them.

I find my new ability to enter and exit buildings without having to open a door or window akin to when an audiophile finally gets their favorite album on pristine 180 gram vinyl. The ease of access grants me so many opportunities. In this case, I can plant a fake file of evidence on Hughes's desk that indicates Arthur Lindsay was the true perpetrator behind all of the crimes Aroma arrested me for. Included with a suicide note on top. Of course, Conrad is downstairs watching TV with Jennifer, so I have to entice him upstairs.

Conrad notices a trail of smoke, but Jennifer claims she can't see anything. He tells her to wait here while he investigates. Upon opening his office door, I am not present, but a police issued 9mm with his finger prints on the trigger floats in front of his face and goes off before he can question whether or not he's hallucinating. Much like introducing a virus into the prison system, this isn't the hard part. Is this even my first time casually faking a man's suicide?

No, my biggest conflicts are the women in my life. Aroma reminds me of every disciplinarian teacher crossed with a baseball bat to the temple. Lilith is a mouse trap that traps you by sucking your cock. Despite my resentment toward them for merely existing, I don't want to harm either. To my recollection, I have only killed two women. And while I did fuck both of them in consensual tristes prior to their respective deaths, I never sought either of them out for the sake of ending their lives. At least one of them ended up in Heaven.

Considering Aroma's pregnancy is the result of Freudlind raping her while she was investigating me, I feel responsibility in taking care of her. While she gives birth to the Antichrist's son who possesses the ability to implode people with his mind, I'll be saving her life.

I'm not certain if she even knows she's pregnant yet, but I don't need to tell her about inducing her miscarriage. Her cooperation in proving to the public I'm innocent possesses the true challenge.

I wait until dusk to show up at her apartment. She's not going to answer the door and let me in, so I appear in her kitchen and sit at the table where she reads the paper like those serve a purpose

beyond bedding for the homeless. Aroma turns on the light after she hears me flicking a tea cup. Rather than running in the other direction, she stands there with her wet red hair wrapped in a towel as droplets form spots on her gray Jersey cotton t-shirt. I should give her some nicer casual wear before I leave.

"Did you get a call about Conrad?" I ask.

"Two hours ago," Aroma says. "His wife turned in something to the station, but no one will tell me what it was."

"A file folder," I say. "Evidence that I'm innocent. A guilty man committing suicide over a case is pretty compelling, even if it's purely fiction."

"Am I next then? I'm tired of men coercing me through intimidation here lately. Not one of you has offered to do something nice for me. You know, like leaving me the fuck alone. Do you realize that participating in this ruins my reputation as a detective? Your escape has already tarnished it by association, Ken. Why not take everything I own, throw it in a dumpster, and create a pyre for me?"

Most people I encounter in these situations are more concerned with their lives, but Aroma seems to think there's something worse than dying. Is it embarrassment or merely destroying her legacy as a police officer that she wanted to keep like a trophy? Nabbing a guy with my body count looks good on every resume. She's delusional yet bold to think I'd care.

"It's 2015, Aroma," I say. "Death isn't a motivator anymore. However, I can paralyze you from the neck down, or give you Lou Gehrig's Disease. Or you can tell everyone you got the wrong guy, and I'll even give you five million bucks so you never have to work again."

"How generous," Aroma says. "Are you going to include the pony ranch and life-sized Ken doll I've always wanted too?"

"So when the press or your superior officer ask for your take," I say, "I need you to say you knew it was Arthur Lindsay the entire time. Then you're going to leave town. Arthur is going to want to kill you, after all. I'll protect you if you cooperate."

Aroma's gaze turns to the floor and her palm rests under her stomach. In a few moments, she's going to be crying in the bathroom, and I'd like to get her cooperation prior to the miscarriage.

"That time of the month?" I ask.

"I'm late, asshole," Aroma says. "Feels like I'm about to start, though."

"Go ahead," I motion. "I'll be back tomorrow if I don't see the press release. Remember: It was Arthur."

Since it's getting late, I return to Walter's old house because I still need to stay out of the public eye. However, something about sleeping in the same place I died in doesn't sit well in my gut. When Birch took the Satanic power, he built his own home in a matter of seconds. I'm not about to put an apartment building on this plot, though I can create a two story building with my ideal apartment at the top.

Demolishing this place might bring me a momentary joy, but I'd still have to clean up the rubble from all the bricks, wood, and glass. Instead, I make Walter Groaan's domicile disappear and in its place sits a brick building with a cream marble stone border on the first floor. The foyer gives

the facade of a luxury apartment lobby with soft red tinted flooring, eggshell white walls, a stairwell that leads to the living quarters, and a long hall that leads to the first floor basement.

All I care about is the king sized bed. As I toss my clothes around the room, I realize I can clean myself without taking a shower, so I don't need to worry about getting my new sheets dirty, but I could just have fresh sheets every day without even moving. But in my sleep deprived mind, I also think about reviving myself without sleep. Then I'd be depriving myself of two pleasures in life we take for granted until we need them. Couldn't I kill everyone in Atlanta without knowing any of them? What purpose does hurting anyone serve?

I can't remember everyone I've killed. In the moment, I thought they were in my way somehow. Although, Freudlind used me to hurt many of the people I don't recall. Which of them deserved an early trip to Heaven or Hell? Certainly my father, but I didn't actually kill him. If my life were a manuscript sitting on some English major's desktop and he pressed CTRL-F to search words like "kill," "murder," and "blood," how much of my story would those acts comprise?

Perhaps I should accept that and stop denying that I'm anything more than a murderer? Giving people second chances because I got one is not unlike everyone being nice to each other after a tragedy. I might end up doing something to traumatize Alan up to and including choking Birch while my cousin bleeds out like a deer carcass in the shower.

I definitely forgot to revive Veronica today. It's almost thirteen hours from Atlanta to Philly, though. Should I actually send up her soul or kidnap a random woman, erase her memories, and change her into Veronica? Now the obligation of eventually fighting Alan publically causes me anxiety the same way a lunch meeting scheduled several days in advance makes me wish I could cancel. Why don't I just fucking do it now so I don't have to later?

When I try mentally sorting through the souls in Hell, I can't find Veronica. Surely she had a soul? All I need is some sleep and time to adjust back to living, and I have this one problem that can't wait. I don't think Birch is going to toss Alan off his balcony if Veronica isn't in his apartment like I promised, but I don't like having egg on my face from overconfidence.

Murray stands at the foot of my bed and luckily doesn't fall over from me summoning him without warning. I'd hate for him to break his hip the first day on the job.

"I need you to find your daughter," I say. "Birch is about to get home and I don't want this shit right now."

"She doesn't want to be found," Murray says. "Since she's part of the Satanic bloodline, she can go wherever she wants in Hell, and you'd have a higher chance of bumping into her at the grocery store than summoning her soul."

"Oh, this fucking bitch right now," I press my hands against my eyelids. "What do you think would make her appear? What can we use as bait? Obviously we can't put Alan on a hook and hope she bites. She never loved the little shit."

"I doubt Birch will be suitable," Murray says. "She didn't really have a chance to love many things."

"What about the things she hated?" I ask. "Besides you, what else has she got?"

"Alison is down there," Murray says. "I suppose you could blow her up like a Thanksgiving parade balloon and hope she scares Veronica out of her hole. That'll only take a million years."

"Get me Alison then," I say. "Send her up here now."

"Umm," Murray says. "You wanna do what now? If you want to know a good reason not to do that, just remember she and I were together. It's my understanding that people who willingly sleep with Antichrists possess poor character, but what..."

"Get her up here," I clap my hands so he'll stop talking.

Leaving in a wisp of smoke, I presume Murray is following my instruction and not cowering back to Hell, but I don't want to have to go back down there tonight. A body falls on my bed and topples to the floor before letting out a sharp breath and looking up at me as I crawl over to see whether or not they're alive.

This woman makes Danny Devito look like Andre the Giant, and her face is round with an unfortunate nose. Should I send her to Philly or to find me truffles?

"You're Alison?" I ask. "Murray really needed higher standards."

"Do you know what it's like to be held down over lava while hot spikes are sodomizing you?" She asks. "I'm surprised I'm not bleeding all over the rug."

"As seductive as this presentation is," I say, "I need a favor. First, you don't have a choice because you're doing this. Second, I'm going to wipe your memory, so it won't matter what you're thinking right now. Third, you don't look anything like your daughter, so I need to fix that."

"Can't I have a moment?" Alison asks.

I'm used to shooting people in the head rather than bringing them back from the dead. If someone asked me for a moment, I'd probably shoot them in the heart instead. Then they'd die slower.

"You haven't even acknowledged who I am, Ken," Alison says. "I used to babysit you. My dad meant so much to your father, and when we found out what he did..."

"What?" I ask. "You want me to feel sorry that our fathers were serial killers? That's all I can be. It's my fate. You didn't have to be a crackwhore of a mother."

"Oh, I had time to think about that while my hair burned to my scalp over and over."

"I don't need to listen to you," I say. "I brought you back because we couldn't find Veronica."

"Good," Alison says. "She deserves her peace."

Though I can change Alison into her daughter, mislead Birch for the sake of my own gain, and try unifying the Trinity in my favor, an urgency inside me says that none of this is right. I came back to life and changed the course of what was supposed to happen; effectively creating a new timeline. None of these people are really who they were anymore. My return to Earth has simply augmented reality to suit my needs, and I might as well be jacked into a computer program or open world game where I make all of the decisions.

"I don't think I need you anymore," I say.

"I thought that was your entire purpose?" Alison asks. "You don't need me. You need Veronica."

"I suppose you don't want to return to Hell?" I ask.

"You suppose right," She says.

"Well, you effectively have your second chance, Alison," I say. "I'm making you a bank account with two million dollars. I can send you anywhere in the world you'd like to go, and you'll never need to deal with me again."

Handing her a debit card, Alison looks at the green plastic with her name engraved and back at me.

"What are you doing with Alan?" Alison asks.

"I'm going to kill him eventually," I say. "Maybe tonight."

"Why don't you send me where you were going to send Veronica? I'd like to see if I can try this again."

"You can go to Japan. You can go to England. You can go to Bendover, Alaska. Why do you want to try being a mother again?"

"Because it's my second chance, like you said," Alison says. "I bet I could do better than someone who won't love him."

"Alright, but I can't promise Birch won't hurt you. He doesn't seem the type."

Once I'm alone again, I lie back and the darkness comes soon. As if the night passes in a moment, the light finds my eyes. The way the sun fills my apartment reminds me of what I thought rich people lived like. Rich people in the South have poor taste in how they display their wealth.

Before I go shower, I look at the news on my phone to see if there's any mention of Conrad Hughes or Aroma Thorn. 11 Alive's website has a headline: Two APD Officers Dead. That could be any Tuesday in Atlanta. None of the other headlines reference Hughes, so I go back to the first one and see their photos at the top of the page.

Although Conrad's suicide and the contents of the file were initially kept out of the media, Aroma Thorn's death at 1:37 AM in Grady Hospital brought more attention to the fact that my case was connected somehow. After going to the ER for her miscarriage, which the news can't legally print, there was some other complication. Her death is a footnote compared to the write up on Arthur Lindsay.

I wanted to take a long shower, eat some kiwi with Japanese apple-pear and a muffin, watch an episode of *Frasier*, and attend to Lilith and father. Having been back for less than twenty-four hours and already inadvertently killed someone, I see that my plans haven't been very full proof. In fact, had Freudlind not raped Aroma, she wouldn't be dead.

Do I kill all three of them? While my father definitely deserves a lot worse than death, Lilith was doing her job. I got some good sex out of it and learned a few things. She'd make an excellent replacement for Freudlind as the new CEO of Fonda Network. I simply can't trust her to be my mouthpiece, though. She's too smart.

What am I going to do when all of this is over today? Prior to Birch shooting me in the head, my life always had a purpose. With all of my power and every enemy gone or indisposed, what do I have to do? Perhaps that's why my uncle and father buried so many people at the old church. When you have everything, what is there to live for?

Having slept on it, allowing Freudlind's business to prosper and Alan to grow up is still realizing Lucifier's plan. That's what I thought I was working against. In the coming years, Fonda's investment in Edison electric vehicles will see most people getting new cars with AI dependent on

the free satellite Wi-Fi. Even the government, power plants, and every conceivable resource we maintain is connected to the Fonda satellite system that's supposed to launch this year.

I materialize in Freudlind's office where he's on the phone. He holds up a finger as I approach him as if I give a shit who he's talking to. After I put the receiver down, I kick his chair back so I can sit on his desk. He's wearing a sweater vest, blue Ralph Lauren shirt, and khaki chinos as if he's about to hit the golf range immediately after work. Hardly the kind of outfit I'd want to die in.

"Hear the news?" I ask.

"I've been busy trying to figure out this proposed merger of yours," Freudlind says.

"Ahh. Remember when I used to be a majority shareholder when no one wanted to buy any Fonda stock? That's been almost five years ago. You couldn't have built this place without me. Oh, by the way, Aroma Thorn died early this morning. She was pregnant with your child."

"That seems to have worked out in both of our favors then," He says.

"Actually, I wanted her to live," I say. "I induced the miscarriage, but something else did it. Some complication. You know how random death can be."

"Did you come here and interrupt my call for this?"

"No. Harley, I came here because I make better decisions after I sleep, and I've slept on this whole merger. I think we're going to take it in a different direction."

"Meaning?" Harley says.

"As the new majority shareholder of both companies," I say, "I am sunsetting the satellite program. There will not be a partnership with Edison, and we're going to keep the name Central Network. Fonda will be absorbed instead. About sixty seconds ago, I sent an email from your company account stating your intent to vacate your position. Happy early retirement, Harley."

Rather than hit me with a snappy comeback, Harley watches his fingers tap on his armrest and makes a sound indicating, "Well, I guess I'm through." People usually beg for their lives or offer whatever they have to you. They list off the reasons they shouldn't die. Harley isn't stupid because he knew before I hung up the phone that he was likely not going to see lunch today.

"I thought about asking you to kill me yesterday," Harley says. "When someone tells you that your whole existence is a lie, then what is my purpose? I thought I was on God's side."

"I'd like to take pity on you," I hold my hand to Harley's face, "But I went to prison for you and never got my due."

He scratches and pushes at my wrist as my fingers burn into Harley's flesh. The way he squeezes my arm and howls as his face turns to black and red makes me chuckle a little. A man made by Satan has such a low tolerance for pain.

Pulling him to the floor, I press all of my weight into a kick against his spine, and I'm not certain I want to actually end Harley's life, but I certainly want him to hurt. He admitted he wanted to die, and I'm not certain my generosity extends that far.

"Normally," I kneel down, "I just do it. Why prolong someone's suffering. Plus, something can go wrong. They can get away. Someone might see you. A good killer does the deed, cleans up the scene, and leaves. You hurt a woman in a way I never could, Harley. I have never been so

desperate for power over someone. Rape? God. People can say a lot about me, and now we can add torturer to the list, but I've never thought to do that."

Harley tries crawling away, so I sit on him and set his hair on fire. His fingers burn as he tries smothering the flame. Now his screaming sounds like an injured bird.

"Now, I'm not saying murder isn't worse than rape," I say. "I'd much rather Murray and Birch took turns fingering my asshole and making me suck their dicks and sent off too soon. You may rather be dead now, but you're going to be sizzling in Hell wishing you could trade that pain for this. Could you take a moment to appreciate what you did to Aroma? She was going to have to raise your son, I think his name was going to be Jason, and live with the memory of you on her."

I get a chill realizing that. Makes me want to shoot Freudlind in the back of the head. Keeping him alive to suffer only serves a momentary desire. I feel similarly about Alan. If I can remove any connection that boy has to Lucifer, along with his power, I can let him live. One ticking time bomb at a time, though.

"Harley," I lean over, "I'll make sure Murray finds a special place for you down there."

Shortly before Aroma found my father, he was living in an old gas station somewhere in Bremen. Makes sense that he wouldn't go far while he was still under contract with Lucifer. With Murray serving that role, Charles Price's deal is voided, and I hope we're able to find him a place near Freudlind.

At this point, Bremen isn't abandoned. The Honda Lock and Walmart are going strong. That's about all this town has. It's unlikely father is working and living in a gas station at this point, so he must've had a stash to live off for a while. In five years, his beard and hair likely make him unrecognizable to anyone who used to know him, but how likely are they to even drive through Bremen?

Instead of sleeping near explosive fire hazards, father lives in a single wide trailer near the downtown area. I knew someone who once described Bremen as a one-horse-town, but add some meth and dented Toyota Camrys for flavor. Just standing in the gravel driveway reminds me of being fourteen again. Before I knew I could kill him, I thought he might kill me one day. As a child, father treasured me and made mother a glorified egg donor. With Satan's power, I see how she once had a personality and a taste for cocaine.

As I approach the front door, I nearly make brake squeals when someone turns the knob and stands in the doorway. Father falls on the cement block steps and down on the overgrown grass as Arthur Lindsay steps outside.

"Excuse me, sir," He holds up a shotgun, "But this here is private property, and the owner is currently indisposed."

I point at the gun and it vanishes from his hands. Rather than jump backwards in shock, Arthur leans down to my father's body and holds him up by the hair so his face looks up at me.

"You must be a little pissy that I took this privilege away from you," Arthur says.

"How did you find him?" I ask.

"Oh, my dear pork packer," Arthur opens his arms. "You can take out all of your enemies one by one, but you can't be in two places at the same time. Lilith, your former fuck hole whore, warned me that the police were going to come down to my house and light me up. She gave me ole

Chucky's address, so I waited until she gave me the go ahead and present you with the fresh corpse of your daddy."

"I'll have to repay her for the courtesy," I say.

"But you can't kill me," Arthur jumps down. "You need me and Birch to help you take out Alan Price on his eighteenth birthday. Way I got this figured out, you wanted me to take the fall for all you'd done and rot in a prison until you came for me. As soon as the deed was done, you'd shoot me in the back like Bruce Dern in *The Cowboys*."

"Then I suppose you're ready to turn yourself in?" I ask.

"Nope. I can't trust you, Ken. That's why I have an insurance policy. Sold my soul to Murray just yesterday."

"What's that gonna do? You traded Heaven for Hell. Sounds like you got burned."

"Means I can come back whenever I want. That was part of the deal. Got me a little honey down there named Shauna Brisco. The first person in the Trinity to trade their everlasting soul to the Devil. Just one more soul, and Murray could throw everything off balance. That might mean bad things for you, Ken."

Conceptually, there should only be three of us on Earth in the Trinity. Introducing more than that certainly throws the scales of Good and Evil off balance. One possibility of three coming back is God sending the last three back to counteract Satan's actions. I only know of Lester Donaldson and Adan Zavala. The man who Lester killed in his youth was supposedly a Native American man, but I can't think back that far.

"So what?" I ask.

"So you're going to build me a new house in Cuba," Arthur says. "I'll be there until 2033, and we'll revisit the whole *me dying thing* then."

Though the realization that Arthur beat me once again makes me want to light everything in a ten-mile-radius on fire, sending him to Hell won't work in my favor. As long as he's alive in eighteen years, I still win. By then, I might contemplate a way to destroy his contract. Returning to Hell doesn't appeal to me at the moment.

"Where's Lilith?" I ask.

"Ahh," Arthur says. "Send me to Cuba and I'll give you a call."

"Fine," I say. "Only a moment, old friend."

Searching for empty plots of land in Cuba, I find something suitable, create a replica of the house from *Modern Family* because that's the first one that comes to mind, and send Arthur out of the country. I hope he enjoys his bland television set home.

"Yeah?" I answer my iPhone.

"Murray sent her to your house," Arthur says. "As a peace offering."

Hanging up the phone, I ensure Arthur's shotgun reappears next to father. Given my indecisiveness, there was a chance I'd let him live. However, I don't appreciate that choice taken from me. Lilith betraying me, when she was lying to me for years, does not bode well for her mortality. With Charles Price gone, someone has to fill his homicidal void in the world. Evil must balance with Good.

Opening my door, I wait a moment at the end of the hall to listen for her. Locking the deadbolt, I look in the kitchen and don't see her in the living room, so she's either in the bedroom, bathroom, or walk-in closet.

"You there?" I lean against the wall.

"Ken," Lilith says.

"I could do it from here without even looking at you," I say.

"You won't, though."

"Confident," I say. "Leading me on for five years, being the sole reason my father is dead, and putting the world at risk by allowing another member of the Trinity to sell their soul? Apparently all meaningless and not warranting me painting my walls red with your insides."

"If you think us fucking constantly and me being the perfect girlfriend for one-thousand-six-hundred-and-forty days is leading you on, I know about a billion men who would suck each other off in a Texas sized orgy just to get a chance to smell my feet."

"So I should be grateful for the deception?"

"Murray didn't send me here to argue with you," Lilith says. "Although, I'd like you to look at me and reconsider."

"And reminisce about how I thought you were a hooker that I paid to live with me?"

"I can give you your money back if you show me a receipt. Also, the preferred term is sex worker."

Turning around to look in the bedroom, I'm prepared to turn her into a marble statue and take a sledge hammer to the stone until her remnants are indistinguishable from broken cement on a common street corner. Of course, she wanted me to look at her. Once in everyone's life who knows love is ruined by that one person. The best fuck of their life leaving them chasing those orgasms to no success. Someone who is the most attractive out of all of them, so you'll judge all of the new faces by theirs.

"You didn't deduct my prison sentence," I say. "We were not together all of the past five years."

"Oh," Lilith sits on the bed. "I bet I can give you back the time we missed out on."

"I know you could," I say. "And I intend to take a lot more than just time from you."

Having lived through every major milestone of mankind, Lilith's memories are a history researcher's wet dream. Never again will she dwell on Adam rejecting her or the many rulers and kings Lucifer sicked her on like a pitbull in heat. Without knowing who she was or remembering how she betrayed me, Lilith won't be the same person, so how can I hold her actions against her? The best aspect is that there's no sign I took away everything other than a blank stare.

"My love, my love," I sit down next to her.

"I'm sorry?" She asks.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Name?"

"Your name is Lilith, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"And do you know mine?"

"Your what?"

"My name," I point at myself.

"No," She says.

"Ken," I touch her cheek. "Why don't you take off that dress and let's see what muscle memory I left."

I'm aware that stripping away a person's autonomy and personality is a crime worse than murder to some people. If I choose to let someone live, they can change their life and never see me again if they choose. However, taking away that option makes them my victim still. Much like the times I was the last person one of my victims saw, I feel so much better now that Lilith isn't herself. Since she'll remain in my home for the foreseeable future, no one will know who she is either.

Also, I need something to do. If I keep hijacking people's lives, then I interrupt the flow of fate. Birch, Arthur, and Alison deserve their second chances. They may not be alive after I kill Alan. However, I also get to enjoy this renewal and my new role as a CEO. Without Freudlind, I know no better person to fill his position.

After a week, I don't make a public appearance when the news covers how I was set up by APD. No one knows that Freudlind is dead yet, and I'm not sure if I should replace him. The fact that one company absorbs another without the CEO being alive says a lot about leadership. As bored as I am now, I would want to implode myself if I sat in that office downtown for more than a day. The more I consider who to put in the role, I realize that I don't know anybody anymore. People who make my acquaintance have a habit of disappearing.

2033 is still eighteen years away, and once that happens, there's nothing left for me to do. Who the hell wants to sit around a house fucking around when they have Satan's power at their disposal? If I want, I can take over the world. No one needs to even know it's me either. There's not a soul I desire to impress, so what's my goal?

When I shuffled from motel to motel after my prison break, I reflected on father. Each morning, he wore a suit, carried a briefcase, and often left before I was ready for school. While he did a lot of Satan's bidding, he also practiced law. Sometimes the difference between the two blurs in retrospect, but he had a career. The people at Central Network knew him as another man to fill up space during meetings without any awareness of what he did.

What was Charles Price's purpose, though? He certainly didn't have goals. Was he any different than the others at Central Network who came to work, performed a replaceable role, came home, watched TV, and went to bed without dwelling on how every day is wasted time?

And I came back to life, created a perfect life, and I'm bored. Father killing random people makes a lot more sense now. However, I'm not sure I'm really alive. The circumstances of my revival and suddenly having everything I wanted are too good. A couple days of vengeance, some minor disappointments, and Lilith's return aren't too dissimilar to what Heaven or purgatory must be like.

I summon Murray from Hell after I tell Lilith to go outside. Without her memory, she resembles a faithful dog more than a woman. I should've sent her back to Hell.

"What can I do for you that you can't possibly accomplish?" Murray asks.

"There's a way back to Earth One through Hell," I say. "If I go back there, I think I'll choose a different year to come back."

"You think you want to go to a different year?" Murray asks. "Are you that bored having everything you ever wanted?"

"Some people like to travel," I say. "I'd like to try time travel."

"Look, Ken," Murray sits down. "Your time excursion left me a little curious, and there's a reason you shouldn't go back there."

"I don't give a shit. You know I'm going to do what I want anyway."

"I'll help you out and give you the info, but you need to give Lilith back her memory and let her go. That was cruel even by my standards, and she deserves better."

"And what're you going to do with her once I'm gone?"

"I haven't decided," Murray says. "Do it, Ken."

Lilith without her personality and knowledge is akin to mashed potatoes without the gravy. She'd help me come up with a better metaphor too. Rather than face her in the moment she regains true consciousness, I send her to a random McDonalds and grant her back the memories I took. If I know her, she'll get a Double Quarter Pounder with cheese and await Murray to give her orders.

"Alright," I say. "What shouldn't I know about Earth One?"

"There are a lot of differences you didn't have time to notice," Murray says. "Earth One is the real world. It's a universe much different from ours. There's no Trinity, no one with Satanic power flying around, and not a quantifiable balance between Good and Evil. The world is just the world and nothing more than what people make it."

"Then I'll be unique," I say. "Sounds like a fun outing."

"Your power won't really work there. You'll still be invincible, but only because you're not real. Neither one of us actually exist."

"I'd call you a liar, but it seems like you actually believe that bullshit."

"Earth One is where we were created, but we're not actual people created by God. Well, you're not."

"What are you leading up to?"

"Do you remember a few years ago when you were in your father's office and looked at his signed copy of *Less Than Zero*?"

"That's a very specific moment, so not really."

"Bret Easton Ellis is still alive on Earth One. He never really died."

"Okay, so you said there were differences between this world and that one."

"He inspired you," Murray says. "Well, he inspired The Author."

"What?" I ask.

"We are fictional characters, Ken. Had you never crossed over into Earth One and come back, I wouldn't be aware of any of this. The events that occurred from my daughter Veronica's birth and 2033 are documented in a book, and I'm sure you're delighted to know that you got your own book."

"But if any of that is true, then this conversation isn't really happening. Obviously, you and I are sitting across from one another and talking."

"Okay," Murray nods. "Let's dissect this. What were you doing before you summoned me?"

"I wouldn't say I was doing anything, Murray. Contemplating my role in this world and what to do next."

"Where were you? Bedroom? Living room? Closet? Kitchen?"

"I was where I am right now," I say.

"Which is where?"

I look around and see that I am in the living room and Murray is sitting across from me, but I can't mentally describe any of my surroundings other than what I laid out earlier regarding the floorplan when I designed the apartment. I'm resting on something, likely a chair or couch, yet I can look right at it and don't feel as if I can describe my own furniture.

"If anything you just said is true," I say, "Then my life is meaningless. I might as well destroy the Earth and go to Heaven."

"But could you do that of your own freewill?" Murray asks.

How do I dictate my actions? If everything I think, say, and do are the result of someone typing at a keyboard while sitting in their pajama bottoms, then how do I know my life's story so well? I am a fully formed man with parents, memories of school, ex-lovers, a long list of people I've killed, and no idea how to proceed with the mess I made.

"Nothing I'm saying is my own thoughts or even my own words," Murray says. "I'm simply not the protagonist of this story, though I have been the main character before."

"Where is all this medium awareness coming from?" I ask.

"This conversation's getting old, Ken. Let's go to Hell."

I find myself not wanting to go through the ordeal of describing Hell once again and cut to the point where I meet The Author, which is the obvious conclusion to the information Murray laid on me. Although, there's a chance I have no choice in this decision as if my life isn't fast forwarded but rather jump cut like a film edit.

Instead of a cottage near the sea or Lincoln Log cabin on a mountainside, I stand outside an apartment in what I presume is somewhere in Atlanta. Something about the rows of units feels familiar to me as if I've been here before, yet it's cleaner here than whatever I'm able to recall. What was that girl's name whose boyfriend I killed? She lived in an apartment somewhere past the Six Flags exit. I think I killed her too.

The man who answers the door is somehow awkwardly handsome with a head I might describe as square, and his teeth have an overbite yet each tooth looks perfectly white and proportionate. His hair, swept back and dark, somehow looks shiny even under the overcast sky.

"Hi," He says.

"Good afternoon," I offer my hand. "Ken Price."

He steps back as if he's about to shut the door and looks at me for a moment.

"Steve Sebastian," He says. "But I guess you knew that if you found my apartment. Are you a fan? I don't remember us ever talking on Twitter."

"Wait," I say. "Murray said that you were in control of everything. You don't know why I'm here?"

"Murray?" He asks. "So you've read *Demise*. Did you want me to sign something?"

"No," I say. "I'm Ken. Your character. You apparently made me?"

I'd conjure a knife or gun to show him that my skin won't break, but Murray didn't lie about my power not working here. Why did I come here then?

"If you get a knife," I say, "I'll let you see if you can cut my hand."

"Dude, that's all made up in my books," Steve says. "And it's weird that you'd come here like this. I might be more understanding if they sold worth a shit, but I'm a journalist. No one knows me for my books."

Not only am I a fictional character, but I'm not even in a bestselling book? This guy's writing must suck. That certainly explains the strange, unrealistic turns my life took.

"How else can I prove this is real?" I ask.

"What's your mother's name?" Steve asks.

"Nicole," I say.

"Okay. Who is your uncle's wife?"

"You mean my Aunt Pat?"

"Alright. You've clearly read my stuff, but..."

"Ask me something a reader wouldn't know, then."

"What school is Jefferson-Tate based on?"

"You mean it's not a real school?" I ask.

"I guess if you were Ken you wouldn't know that. Uhh."

He holds up a finger and shuts the door. When he returns, he doesn't hold a knife but rather a hammer. I'm not going to enjoy wherever that lands, but I'll let him hit me to prove my story.

"Steve," I hold my arms up. "If that's what you need to do."

"Are you going to sue me if I hurt you?" He asks.

"You're not going to hurt me," I say. "Here, I'll turn around..."

He uses the top of the hammer to punch me in the left cheek. While I'm not going to bruise, the metal sends a vibration through my skull and muscles while my teeth clench. I don't yell or moan, yet I want to take the hammer from Steve and shove the end up his rectum.

"That should've broken something," He says.

"Well, it didn't," I stand straight up. "There probably isn't even a red mark."

"Nope," He looks closely. "Come inside, Mr. Price."

Instead of empty beer cans, beat up paperbacks, a smoking ashtray, or even a dead hooker, Steve's apartment is not unlike my own with a minimalist approach that even exceeds mine without a single picture or painting on the walls. Even the desk in the corner lacks the grand decrepitude I expect from an author. There're no coffee mug stains or burn marks.

"Coke Zero?" Steve asks. "I know Birch drinks them, but I can't remember if you do."

"I'll take one," I say. "Odd that you'd mention him. I guess we're all just characters to you."

"I've been in all of your heads a lot," He says.

Returning with a serving tray, Steve sets down two cans, tall ornate glasses, and an ice bucket. How many people does he entertain if he has this kind of setup? I never thought to bring out a tray with all this social accoutrement.

"Can I see the books?" I ask.

"Oh," Steve says. "You haven't... Hang on."

He sets four books in front of me: *Demise of the Trinity*, *Price of the Trinity*, *Surviving New America*, and *Birch*. I surmise that the second one is my book, but Birch got his name as his title. I guess he's the favorite then.

"Which one do I die in?" I ask.

"*Demise*," Steve says.

"What happens in the one about me?"

"It's about your time in college."

"So I guess I'm caught up on the first two. What's this *New America* business?"

"I tried writing a Kurt Vonnegut sort of thing with all the political stuff that was going on during COVID."

"COVID?"

"Don't worry about it," Steve pulls the books away. "What exactly were you planning to do here?"

If he made me, shouldn't Steve understand my motivations and therefore be able to explain why I'm here? Considering my life is split into two books and I serve no greater purpose other than filling white pages with black text, then I expect a little more from him.

"I assume you're familiar with your own books," I say. "Is the whole Earth One concept in this bitch novel?"

"Earth One?" Steve asks.

"Didn't Birch jump timelines like I did?"

"No, that novel is about his time in Philadelphia."

When I open the book, all of the words look like gibberish. Everything in the first three books is in English, though.

"Isn't this Earth One?" I ask.

"Look man," Steve says. "I'm not really all that complicated. None of what I wrote is either. Besides, I wrote all of it when I was in college and thought I was going to be a famous novelist."

"You didn't write any of this," I say.

I don't remember how I got to Steve's apartment, but I definitely recall all of the conversation I had with Murray. Another trick from Satan to fuck with my head. None of the books have Steve Sebastian on the cover anyway. It's some guy named Patrick Attaway. Sounds like a guy who sleeps with a blanket over his head because he thinks vampires might attack him at night.

"Patrick Attaway," I hold up the book.

But Steve isn't in the room anymore. In fact, the room isn't the same. Instead, the white walls and floor glow as if I'm looking at a screen. Then the light dims into a gray before fading into black. For less than a moment, I am surrounded. The darkness replaces everything.

My eyes open and Lilith is asleep next to me. Instead of the apartment, we're back in my old bedroom. I pull up the iPhone on the nightstand to see the time, and the date is February 2011.

Everything I changed is undone, but so is my fate. Am I going to be able to prevent my demise, though? Eventually, I will have to die by Birch's hand. Freudlind is going to kill Walter Groaan and dissolve Central Network. New York won't survive Alan Price. Society as we know it is

going to fail. Meanwhile, Lilith doesn't know that I'm aware she's distracting me, and Lucifer is Satan again. Perhaps he's the key to this constant disorder?

"Why are you sitting up," Lilith tries pulling me back.

"I need to pee," I say.

"I'll make us something to eat," She says.

"No," I get out of bed. "I'll get dressed and take us out."

"Oooo," She lifts a leg in the air. "Brunch."

I pull on my jeans, run down the stairs to father's office for one of his guns, and back to the garage. His black Porsche is here. The car that opened my world at Jefferson Tate. I have to get on the road before Lilith can chase after me.

If I'm still alive, then has Alan even been born yet? I'm not certain on the timeline. I think Veronica has Alan in early 2015? While I couldn't show up at Walter's house and gun him down, I can stop Satan's spawn from happening. Then I'll need to figure out whether to kill Freudlind or Murray. He can't stop me from going after Harley because he doesn't even realize that Lucifer made a second Antichrist.

As I get closer to Alison's apartment, my phone rings. It's Murray.

"And I thought you were done with me?" I answer.

"What are you doing, kid?" Murray asks. "Why don't you turn around at the nearest exit and go home?"

"So you know where I'm going?" I ask. "Are you also aware that I know Lilith isn't really some former whore I picked up outside a bar, Murray? Has Lucifer told you about Harley Freudlind yet? You know he's the second Antichrist, right?"

"Look, Ken, I don't know what you're going on about. I'm asking you to go home. I'll meet with you, buy us lunch, we'll have a drink; whatever the hell you want. Just don't do what you're about to do."

"You can't avoid what I'm telling you, Murray," I say. "Freudlind is going to kill Walter and hire two people in the Trinity to take down Central Network HQ. It's all part of Lucifer's plot, and you're never going to realize your full potential as the original Antichrist. Do you not find that even remotely irritating?"

"We'll talk about that," Murray says. "We'll talk about anything you want."

"Hey Murray," I pull into a parking space. "You wanna stay on the phone while I do it?"

"Do what, Ken? You shouldn't be there and shouldn't even know who they are."

"Oh, you mean your daughter?" I ask. "Veronica?"

I end the call and go over to the apartment's door. Rather than knock and wait for Alison or Veronica to answer, I try the handle and it's unlocked. Alison is passed out on the couch, and she looked better when I revived her from Hell. A girl is sitting in the kitchen. The smell of chicken ramen noodles can't overpower the weed, which always reminds me of rubber cement and skunk piss.

Even though she's about four or five years younger than when I met her in Philly, Veronica has that same emo girl face that no doubt came from Murray's genes. Some people have resting bitch face. Veronica has resting suicidal tendencies face.

"Who are you?" She asks.

"Sorry, sweetie," I hold up the revolver. "I don't have time to talk."

The loud pop doesn't wake up Alison. I'd stage a murder scene if this gun wasn't registered in my father's name. In a neighborhood like this, gun shots aren't exactly surprising. For a moment, I look at Alison snoring on the couch and consider killing her too, but she's not going to birth Satan's son.

Backing out of my space and putting the car in drive, my phone keeps vibrating, so I answer on speaker so I can focus on getting the fuck out of here. I'm surprised Lucifer didn't send my father to try stopping me. Alison doesn't live far from Bremen.

"Ken?" Murray opens. "Why'd you fucking do it, Ken? Did you have to go after my daughter?"

"Your daughter was going to be Lucifer's egg donor," I say. "Did you want me to perform a hysterectomy on her instead?"

"I asked you to meet with me. We could've worked something out."

"It's Saturday, Murray," I say. "You think Harley is at home?"

"What the fuck are you talking about, Ken? You just murdered my only child. No one should've even known where she was. How did you find out?"

"You wanna know what's extra freaky?" I ask. "You could've stopped me but Lucifer put a muffle on your power after you knocked up Alison."

"How did you know about her?" Murray raises his voice.

"You'd better make sure Lilith isn't at my place when I get home," I say. "I'll do her next."

When I hit a red light, I turn my phone off and put it in the glove compartment. Murray can't protect Harley because that would ruin Lucifer's ruse. If I'm able to take Harley out next, I can buy the remaining shares of Fonda and stop the satellite program from launching. Will I be merely delaying one of Lucifer's plots, though? I'm sure he has a gambit in place so he wins no matter the outcome.

Unless I'm misremembering, Harley never gave me his address. I eventually found his property later, but he wouldn't be expecting me to show up here. It's not as if I can look him up in the phonebook or Google. If Lucifer cares about his investment, I imagine Harley won't be home when I show up.

When I go down the gravel driveway, I see Harley through his large windows as he leans over his kitchen island. Our eyes meet when he turns around to use his sink. By the time, I get out of the car, Harley is standing outside wiping his hands off.

"Ken?" He calls.

"Sorry I didn't call first," I say. "I had to get out of the house before Lilith could distract me. You know: Women."

"Oh, of course," Harley nods. "I'm quite familiar with their ways. I wasn't expecting company, though, so..."

Before he can run inside, I have the revolver out and fire a shot at him. One lands in his right thigh, and Harley falls over from the impact.

"This is my second time killing you lately," I say. "I hope this isn't a habit of ours."

"Ken, you are actively working against the Lord," Harley says.

Another shot into his forehead ends the scene. The only reason I can surmise Lucifer hasn't stopped me is that he's aware I might try to kill him too. Do I still have access to the power I took from him in 2015? I rushed through my grocery list this morning and didn't question what Murray told me before I went to Earth One, which was obviously not real. Who the hell was Steve Sebastian?

I focus on Freudlind and imagine him fading into a light flame much like burning paper slowly shrinking in the heat. His remains transform into ash, so I guess doubt is a powerful tool. I could've done all of this without a gun or the Porsche, but it felt so much better that way. These powers open too many doors. Makes me sound like some Urban Fantasy protagonist with a name like Erik spelled with a K.

Why am I still concerned with how my life is a series of deaths all leading up to my own? I've killed enough people for this no longer to phase me, yet I can't help questioning it all. Harley deserved to die no matter what side of the Good vs Evil spectrum I reside on, but Veronica was somewhat innocent. Sure, she later murdered her mother and gave birth to Satan's child that grew up to destroy New York, but her life ended as if I made a chess move.

I'm coming off the road leading to Harley's property when there's an unmistakable black mark in the sky. Before braking, I look to see if anyone is behind me. There're no cars except mine anywhere. The trees stop moving in the wind. Moving downward as if God cuts the atmosphere with a scolding blade, someone emerges out of the opening.

Speeding directly at me, Birch should be in South Carolina crying over killing his daddy while not getting any from that woman using him to steal shit. I'd get out to greet him, but my door won't open. I try imagining it magically disappearing, and nothing happens.

I'm jolted forward by the impact of him landing on the Porsche's hood, and I keep hoping the car won't flip over even as the sky becomes the ground in my line of vision. Even with my seatbelt on, my head hits the roof. Since it's Birch and he's the figurehead, I can smell the color purple and see waves of clear green.

He pulls me out and rolls me onto the blacktop. I have the urge to clear my throat, but something's lodged there. When I try sitting up, my upper back locks up.

"I am not the fucking time police, Ken," Birch says. "Yet the Lucifer of this timeline is sending me messages that you're fucking everything up."

"So I get to die again?" I ask. "More humiliating than before, huh?"

"You can't die," Birch says. "I killed you over two-hundred years ago."

"Then why am I not in Heaven?" I ask. "There's nothing harmonious about this place."

"Sometimes people aren't ready to go."

Birch pulls me up and my pain ceases as if I was never injured. We're no longer outside standing next to a decimated Porsche. Instead, there are stacks of library books standing in rows around us. As I'm trying to acclimate, I recognize Steve Sebastian sitting at a table reading a newspaper.

"You're done," Birch says. "If you don't stop holding onto Earth, you're gonna be stuck here until the world ends. I can tell you from personal experience that's going to take some time."

"Are you dead too, Birch?" I ask. "Still hoping to go back and fix everything?"

"I tried going back and fixing things," Birch says. "Several times. Lifetimes even. Unlike you, I'm not due for Heaven for a long time."

"Alright. How do I end this?"

"You need to resolve what's keeping you grounded."

Getting revenge and killing the same people again apparently does not quench my soul's thirst for resolution. What issues am I not holding on to? Everyone in my life betrayed me in some way. Even my college roommate, Leslie, used me to a degree. My greatest resentment lies with my father. After I thought he was dead, I took control of my life, yet still operated as someone else's puppet. I wasn't born a murderer, but that was my destiny before I was even conceived.

"How?" I ask.

"Let go of your animosity," Birch says. "Don't worry about the people you hurt, Ken. Consider the pain you retain because it drives you."

Birch turns around to leave, but I catch his wrist.

"Wait," I say. "The stuff Murray told me about us being fictional characters..."

"We are fictional, Ken," Birch says.

"Then who was Steve Sebastian?" I ask.

"You saw him too? He's probably not the same Steve Sebastian I met."

"Murray said that he was The Author. But the name on the books was Patrick Attaway."

"Attaway?" Birch asks. "I've seen that name before. Right next to my mother's headstone, actually. If he's The Author, then where is he?"

"Earth One?" I ask.

"No, Earth One is fictional too," Birch says. "It hasn't been the same since I was first there in 2015, either. My presence caused another timeline to open there."

"How do you know Earth One isn't real?" I ask.

"It's like The Author's other world or something," Birch says. "The Trinity couldn't happen in the real world, so it can't exist in Earth One. There's a Steve Sebastian that lives on Earth One, but he's a journalist."

"The one I met said he was a journalist," I say.

"Alright, enough," Birch says. "The more we talk, the less likely you are to finally move on."

"But is that even my choice?" Ken asks.

"I have to leave, Ken," Birch says.

I can't stop him from dematerializing and simply not being there. For a moment, I stare at the floor, noticing the fibers on top of the carpet from all the people who've thread on the material since someone laid it down, and inhale while trying not to think. That carpet isn't real. My thoughts aren't mine. If I am a fictional character, my existence is finite, yet I feel as if I will be here for eternity.

But if The Author stops writing, then I cease to exist in the moment.